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SILVER-PLATED SOL, THE MONTANA ROVER; Or, Giant Dave's Fight With Himself.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "CANYON DAVE," ETC., ETC.



SILVER-PLATED SOL STARTED BACK IN KEEN ALARM, AS THE GIANT GRIZZLY'S CLAWS LITERALLY TORE THE SHIRT FROM HIS BREAST, BUT WOUNDING HIM ONLY SLIGHTLY.

Silver-Plated Sol,

THE MONTANA ROVER;

OR,
Giant Dave's Fight With Himself.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,
AUTHOR OF "LIGHTNING BOLT," "HORSESHOE HANK," "CACTUS JACK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT.

"No light! I reckon he must have become tired of waiting and sought his peaceful couch, though that is hardly the way of Roger Hillard, and he knows I never failed to keep an appointment. If there's one thing Silver-Plated Sol holds sacred, it's his promise."

The man who thus soliloquized was walking along a trail which led eastward from the town of Red Summit, Territory of Montana, and approaching a cabin which stood by the side of the faintly-marked road.

It was a wild and rocky region, one where man had until very recently been but a nomad, but Red Summit had gained rapidly after its first cabin was erected, and a population of two hundred souls slept under its roofs at the time of our story.

Silver-Plated Sol, as the night wanderer had called himself, advanced to the door of the cabin and laid his hand on the latch. The door was fastened.

"That's odd," he observed. "I never knew Roger to use such care before. What can it mean?"

He rapped sharply, and then awaited an answer. None came. Twice he repeated the summons, but all remained silent. He stepped back and surveyed the cabin critically. It was dark and, somehow, seemed unnaturally silent and gloomy.

He began to feel ill at ease. Never before had he known his friend to fasten the door, and he had felt sure of finding him within. Now, he believed that if he had been called away by imperative business he would have left the door open and some message visible.

There was little worth stealing inside.

"Perhaps he is sick. I'll go in, anyhow, and see. Here goes!"

He walked to the window and, after some trouble, raised it. This done, it was not hard to crawl through.

He knew where Hillard kept his lamp and matches, and he walked at once to the shelf. They were in their place, and he soon had a light.

The room, which occupied over half of the building, was empty, but he was at once impressed by a singular and suspicious fact. Confusion reigned everywhere. The two chairs lay on their backs, while in one corner the table leaned against the wall, crushed out of shape.

Seeing all this at one rapid glance, the manner of the explorer perceptibly changed. His nostrils dilated, his head became more erect, and he laid one hand on his revolver, which was thrust in his belt. Then he pushed open the door of the inner room and strode through.

Here the confusion was repeated, nor was that all. On the floor were red stains of blood, and in one corner was a motionless heap which speedily resolved itself into the form of a man.

Silver-Plated Sol sprung forward and held down the lamp.

"Hillard—dead!" he exclaimed, in a tone of horror.

It did, indeed, look as though the man was done with life, and all things spoke of the darkest crime known to man—murder.

The explorer was not one to lose his self-possession, and he quickly set down the lamp and proceeded to look for his friend's injuries. At almost the first touch the latter's eyes opened and he looked up at Sol, but the brightness was forever gone from them.

A look of recognition was on his face, however.

"I'm done for!" he gasped.

"No, no!" said Sol, quickly. "I'll dress your wounds, and you shall—"

"Don't try," Hillard faintly said. "I'm cut too deep to pull through; the best surgeon in the country couldn't save me. Let me alone; it'll all be over in a few minutes."

"Who was the dog who attacked you?"

"That's what I want to know. Who was it? Who could have wished me dead? I had no enemy in the world that I know of, and there was nothing to steal. Why was the woman here?"

"Was there a woman?"

"Yes, and she was the fiercest of the two. Who was she, and why did she hate me?"

The question was feebly put, and Silver-Plated Sol knew from his manner that his life was fast ebbing away and might go before the mystery of his death was even partially revealed.

"Tell me all about it," he said.

"I will, and perhaps you can find out who did it."

"I will learn, and I will avenge you!" Sol declared, his face growing set and stern.

"I no longer think of revenge; I am too near the grave for that. But you shall hear the story. Give me water; it will help me a little."

His voice was faint and husky, but when Sol had obeyed his request it cleared somewhat and he spoke with more steadiness.

"I was sitting here, perhaps two hours ago, and bending over the table as I wrote a letter, when the door opened and some one entered. I thought it was you, though I had not expected you so soon, and, without turning my head, I observed that I would be at liberty in a moment. There was no answer, but, before I had time to wonder at it, I received a terrible blow upon my head which knocked me from my chair.

"Probably my assailant had thought to stun me, but the blow did not fall just right, and I was up again quicker than might be expected. I wheeled about and saw a man and woman, and as I did so the latter exclaimed, in a sibilant voice: 'Kill him!'

"The man sprung forward and, before I could move to get a weapon, he closed with me. I was somewhat dazed from the force of the blow I had received, and my usual strength and skill seemed wanting. Still, I made a hard fight, and we reeled back and forth through the room, upsetting the table and chairs as we did so.

"For some time the woman took no part in the fight, but my adversary began to breathe heavily, as though losing strength, and he unclosed his lips to utter two words: 'Knife him!'

"I tried to whirl and avoid the blow, but it seems she must have had the weapon ready, for I almost immediately felt a sharp pain between the shoulders. I had been struck hard and deep. Other blows followed, and from that time I have but a confused idea of the fight. Both were striking me, and I soon lost strength and consciousness. I fainted, and when I recovered I was alone—and dying."

This statement had been slowly and laboriously made. It was broken by many pauses, when life seemed likely to leave him forever, but he struggled on and told all.

Still, it was clear that his minutes on earth were few.

"And you have no idea who these people were?" slowly questioned Silver-Plated Sol.

"None at all."

"Robbery could not have been their motive—"

"No, for I had nothing to steal."

"Possibly you were heir to a fortune somewhere."

"Not a cent."

"Then, what was the motive, and who were they?"

Sol asked the question with sore perplexity, for he was resolved to bring the assassins to justice, and it seemed that no clew whatever was vouchsafed him.

"I have no idea; not the slightest. But, who ever they were, they have done their work well, for I—am—dying!"

The last words were spoken with a gasp, which gave Sol warning of what was coming, and he hastened to say what a man could in such a sad moment. But he could not hold back the ebb-tide, and in two minutes Roger Hillard was dead.

For several minutes Sol remained gazing silently on the motionless face. The two men had been friends, though not close and intimate ones; their acquaintance had not been long enough for that; but Sol Colton had liked him well and he was sincerely grieved by his untimely end.

Indignation, too, filled the mind of the survivor. He knew Hillard had been a just and generous man, and he felt sure no misdeemeanor of his had led to the tragedy. What, then, had been the motive of the unknown assassins?

"I don't know," he muttered, "but I'm going to learn. No such deed as this can go unavenged, even in Montana. I'll discover the guilty parties and bring them to justice. The fact that there was a woman in the game will help me immensely; unless the murderers travel almighty shy I shall be able to trace them. And I'll do it; ay, I'll hunt them down and give the law its deserts. I suppose the creed of the West would make me an avenger by knife and revolver, but, in my opinion, the law is a tribunal more to be dreaded than man's unauthorized efforts."

He aroused himself with a start and strode from the cabin. Valuable time might be going to waste, and it was well to give the alarm and see if the assassins could be overtaken before they were fairly gone from the place.

Silver-Plated Sol was a nomad of the West. Little was known about him, as he never stayed long enough in any place to make a history, and he was confidential only in regard to minor matters. It was clear that he had traveled over the greater part of the West, and, possessing a tenacious memory, was a mine of information to all who saw fit to apply.

He was about twenty-seven years of age and a man of admirable form. An adept in boxing and wrestling, few cared to meet him after having once seen his prowess. He was also an excellent revolver shot, and it was from the fact that the greater part of these weapons were plated with silver that he had received his sobriquet.

The alarm was soon given, and while others went to care for Hillard's body, Sol took several reliable men and instituted a search for the mysterious man and woman. Success did not at once reward their efforts, however, for no such persons were to be found in the village, nor had any one seen them.

But Sol Colton's purpose was not to be changed.

CHAPTER II.

THE WILL AND THE WAY.

BOWLER BAR!

It was not a very lofty name, yet it was well suited to the Montana town which had been pitched on the eastern slope of the mighty Rocky Mountains. Mad river furnished the "bar," and Nature had certainly furnished a plentiful supply of boulders. Consequently, as people liked the name of their own choosing, they were as well satisfied as though it had been proved acceptable to the world in general by generations of use.

One afternoon, Joseph Danforth, the young town's postmaster, was seated alone in his office and buried so deeply in thought that he did not hear the entrance of a second person who had come in lightly.

The new-comer was a girl, and she paused and looked at him with a bright smile on her fair features—for she was fair, with her bright, piquant face, brown eyes, light-brown hair and merry mouth. She had an unusually small form, but this only served to enable her body to keep pace with her active mind; she was as quick of motion as a kitten.

She was his sister, and, therefore, she was taking no liberty when she stole up behind him and suddenly brought her hands down on his shoulders, but he made a sudden spring which took him several feet from his chair.

The girl laughed merrily.

"Bless us, how nervous we are getting to be. I hope I shall never fall in love if it has such an effect. Pray, do you start thus when Lois touches you?"

Joseph had faced about, and had his sister been in an observing mood she would have seen that his face bore a frightened look, but it passed away somewhat as he saw who had thus come upon him.

He laughed uneasily.

"You are having a good time at my expense, but this post-office is scarcely the place for such surprises. My first thought was of road-agents, and you are lucky I did not have a revolver handy. Confine your playfulness to the house after this, Ettala."

The last sentence was spoken with a harshness which caused her to pout for a moment, but her irrepressible spirits soon broke loose again.

"And would you speak thus to Miss Lois Orme?" she asked. "I think not. No, you would—"

She ceased speaking as a shadow fell at her feet and turned to look at a new-comer. A man had entered and stood looking at her, and he now raised his hat with ceremonious politeness.

"How do you do, Miss Danforth? I hope my coming is not untimely. Joe, good-evening. Is there a letter for me?"

The speaker would not have ceased addressing pretty Ettala so soon had he not seen that, if she spoke at all, it would probably be to tell him his coming was not a cause of great pleasure, whether timely or not.

Mr. Luke Burbank was no favorite of hers; she knew him too well. He was a man who managed to live well and dress well, though he never did any actual work. It was generally said that if the Double Deck gambling-house did not exist at Bowler Bar, Mr. Burbank would fold his tent and depart to other scenes.

He was about the postmaster's own age, a little short of thirty, small of stature, a pronounced blonde, yet not a man of irresolute character. Under his straw-colored mustache could be dimly seen tightly-compressed lips, indicative of a strong will, and his steel-blue eyes were cold and relentless of appearance.

There was no letter for him, and when he was assured of the fact he went out with Joseph, much to Ettala's relief. She had come to relieve her brother for a while at the office, and she did not desire his company.

"Where away, Danforth?" the gambler asked, when they were in the outer air.

"To my supper," briefly answered the postmaster.

"I will walk with you, as I have a word to say to you. It concerns your sister."

"Concerns Ettala?" said Joseph, in surprise.

"Yes. You see, I am not proof against charms like hers, and, to be brief, I have fallen in love with her. My object in seeking you is to ask for her hand."

Danforth's face plainly expressed dissatisfaction.

"Ettala has not mentioned that there was a love affair between you," he said.

"Very likely not, for the good reason that there is none. I have reason to believe the young lady dislikes me."

"Well, I should say that disposes of the case, then," observed Joseph, his face brightening.

Burbank's face moved with a disagreeable smile.

"But it does not, my dear Danforth. I desire her for my wife, and I rely on you to help me."

"That I can't do, Burbank. Ettala is old enough to choose for herself; otherwise she would not be old enough to marry. As near as I can figure it, if she dislikes you that disposes of the whole case once and for all."

"Perhaps I am a better mathematician than you," said the gambler, smiling coldly. "At any rate, I can figure out a different conclusion. You are Ettala's brother, and her senior, and, as such, what you say should go undisputed. I wish you to help me win the girl."

"I must decline. Ettala is the sole mistress of her future," said Danforth, firmly.

"You are prejudiced against me."

Had the postmaster told the truth he would have said he knew Luke Burbank to be a rascal, and did not want his sister to associate with such a man, but it is not always wise to speak one's opinion freely.

"Not at all, Mr. Burbank, but, as I said before, she is her own mistress and must choose for herself. You say she dislikes you, and that seems to settle it."

"It don't settle it," said Burbank, coolly. "You are going to help me, and Miss Ettala shall become my wife whether she is willing or not!"

The cool insolence of this assertion made Danforth flush with anger. It was policy for him to retain the good will of the people of Bowlder Bar, but the gambler was going too far.

"You're infernally mistaken!" he exclaimed. "My sister will not become your wife against her will, nor will I help you. Are you insane?"

"Yes, but there's method in it," said Luke, with an undisturbed smile. "Now, Joseph, don't get on your ear and prance around here, for it won't do any good. I make it a point to keep to myself except when I'm sure of the ground under my feet, as I am in the present case. I rely on your aid, not because you love me, but because self-preservation is the first law of nature. You'll sacrifice Ettala rather than yourself."

"What rubbish are you talking?" curtly asked the postmaster, but his face was not wholly calm.

"There's no rubbish about it; I'm hinting at the bottom facts of the Red Summit tragedy!"

Burbank's manner changed suddenly, and he shot forth the last words quickly and incisively.

They did not fail to hit the mark. Danforth started back as though some one had dealt him a blow, and then stood staring at the gambler with wild eyes and a white face. He was the picture of consternation and alarm, but a sneering smile hovered on Burbank's face once more and he was wholly at his ease.

"The Red Summit tragedy," he slowly repeated.

Danforth seemed to make a great effort to regain his self-possession, and, to a certain degree, he succeeded, but the frightened look still rested on his face.

"What do you mean?" he asked, with an apparent effort to seem at his ease.

"Joseph, don't be a fool. You know what I mean. If you don't, allow me to say that, a short time ago, one Roger Hillard, of the town of Red Summit, this Territory, was murdered by a man and woman whose identity is not known to the Red Summit people. I know who they were; I can place my hand on them at any time; and I can tell the world why Hillard was put out of sight. If I should do this, Joseph, it would go hard with you!"

The gambler had a way of speaking carelessly, but at the same time of sneering and cutting his victim to the quick, which was most galling, and he would have made a very good Mephistopheles as he stood there.

Danforth stood staring at him dumbly. The frightened look did not go from his face, but, except for that, it was very nearly expressionless. What was passing in his mind was not clear, but he knew the worst at last; he knew just what Burbank had been worming around to in his gradual way.

Red Summit

The name struck a chill to his very heart, and he would not have been more frightened had the genuine right-bower of the prince of darkness appeared to foreclose his claim upon him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said feebly.

"Rubbish! Don't be a fool, Joseph. You do know, and I have only to go into details to convince you that I know, too. I'll do it if you insist, but I believe it will be better for me to say nothing. Walls have ears, and you don't want any more people in the secret. Come, be sensible; agree to help me, and you shall find my

tongue a close one. What do you say—shall Ettala be my wife?"

Danforth felt like anything but talking with the gambler just then, and he caught at the resource of all persons forced into a corner.

"I must have time to think of this," he said.

"Just as you say. I am not a hard man to deal with. Let me say, however, that you need not think of proposing a compromise; you have your choice between helping me to win Ettala or having the world know all about the Red Summit affair. Be sensible, and you will make a valuable friend in me; I stick like a burr when I catch on. That's enough for now, and I'll bid you good evening!"

Burbank waved one of his white hands gracefully and sauntered away, his face the picture of contentment, but he left Joseph Danforth looking as though the end of the world had come and left him a wreck on life's beach.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAGICIAN'S PROPHECY.

AT the western side of the village of Bowlder Bar was a hillside which sloped back toward the "eternal mountains." Against its base, at one point, the waters of Mad river dashed themselves with venomous force, but vainly, for they were flung back from a massive ledge and forced to assume a new course.

This ledge, which was wide and high, was known as Madrock Ledge.

Half-way up the hill, and a hundred feet above the level of Bowlder Bar, was a goodly-sized house. Its site was a commanding one, for from that point an observer could look down and see the town in all its outside show, but the owner was a man little known to the people in general. Over the door hung a rude, but fairly painted sign, which bore this inscription:

"HAMED,

"MAGICIAN AND FORTUNE-TELLER."

Three months before carpenters had received orders to erect the house, and when it was done Hamed moved in without show or ceremony. Since that time he had never been seen in the village. He had a discreet and uncommunicative Chinese servant, named Sing-So, who regularly visited the supply stores to obtain the necessities of life, and he seemed to be Hamed's only means of connection with the outside world.

There was some degree of interest at Bowlder Bar when it was known there was a so-called fortune-teller near them, and many of the people went from curiosity to hear what he would tell them. Curiously enough, those who went did not seem inclined to talk about their interview, and maintained such an air of mystery that the idea became almost general that Hamed was really a man to be feared.

Ignorant people said he was in league with the powers of darkness; intelligent persons had come to look upon him as a vicious man and an undesirable citizen.

Yet, the Magician kept to himself and to his cabin. He made no acquaintances and seemed to mind his own business. Despite this, the people of the Bar looked with dissatisfaction at the cabin which stood on the Madrock Ledge, like an eagle's nest on the face of a cliff.

Two hours after the interview last described, two persons—ladies—approached and slowly ascended the ledge. Darkness had fallen and no one seemed to be observing them, but the steady light from Hamed's window served as a beacon and they went on steadily until near the house.

Then they began to falter. Each looked at the other, and one, the smaller of the two, finally spoke.

"I am afraid, Lois."

"Of what?"

"Of Hamed—of the house. You know what people say about the place, and about the Magician."

"Do you believe he is a supernatural being, a visitor from the realms of darkness?"

"Nonsense! I trust I am not so foolish as that, but a man with an evil turn of mind is enough of a villain for me. True, we do not know Hamed is of that sort, but his reputation is not of the best."

Ettala Danforth, for the speaker was she, spoke faintly and, plainly, was as much disturbed as her words would indicate, but her companion was of a naturally stronger will and braver nature.

"Others have been here ahead of us and fared well, and I do not see why we should not do the same. The shadowy reputation for evil which the Magician possesses is but the result of his habits of seclusion and his trade. So far as the latter goes, we are already agreed that he is doubtless an arrant impostor—how can we believe otherwise?—and you know we came here for pleasure."

Ettala laughed uneasily. It was a mere freak which had led the young ladies to start on the expedition, and to Ettala it no longer seemed likely to result in the sport they had anticipated.

Her companion was Lois Orme, the girl Ettala had banteringly mentioned to her brother. The

people of Bowlder Bar believed Joseph Danforth and Miss Orme were engaged lovers, but Ettala knew to the contrary. She knew Joseph ardently desired such a state of things, but there had been some hitch in affairs which only the chief characters understood.

Ettala had never been able to decide whether Lois cared for Joseph. At times it seemed so, but, anon, just the contrary appeared to be the case, and as neither saw fit to confide in the younger girl, she was at fault.

Lois was twenty-four years of age; a tall, queenly young lady who united with a beautiful face and fine form a remarkably well-balanced mind. Ettala stood somewhat in awe of her, despite the fact that they were friends, and, though herself possessed of a good deal of latent spirit, usually chose to be a follower rather than a leader.

Consequently, on the present occasion, the matter went as Lois said, and they decided to go on and dare the possible dangers of Hamed's temple of far-sight.

Lois rapped at the door and it was promptly opened by Sing-So, the Chinese servant previously mentioned. He was a muscular fellow for one of his race, and his face was intelligent if not comely. He glanced once at the girls, and then stepped back for them to enter.

They passed the threshold, the door was closed, and they were fairly launched on their venture.

"Wantee see Hamed?" Sing So asked.

"Yes," answered Lois.

"Hab fortune tlold?"

"Yes."

"All light. Walk in next roomee; Hamed there."

He indicated an inner door, and they went on and entered.

They found themselves in a well-lighted room. If there were windows they were concealed by the dark curtains which covered the walls at all points. The fortune-teller had resorted to all the traditional arts of his craft to make the place impressive. Besides the dark curtains there were numerous paraphernalia which need not be described now, but all of which were calculated to impress a susceptible mind.

Hamed was a true disciple of the black art, so far as his outfit went.

The Magician of Madrock Ledge was himself as impressive as his surroundings. They saw an old man of large frame, whose heavy white beard descended far over his breast, and was almost equaled by his hair; while a black robe, or gown, covered his person from neck to ankle, and a close-fitting, visorless cap rested on the top of his head.

In all respects he was like the fortune-teller of tradition.

The huge beard and blue-glass spectacles left little of his face visible to determine his character, but Lois's first impression was that he was a man of strong mind, who did not show any signs of an evil nature. His expression was dignified, if not noble.

"Welcome, young ladies," he said, in a deep, calm voice. "I suppose, of course, that you have come to have your future revealed?"

"Such is our object," answered Lois, evenly, as she pressed Ettala's hand reassuringly.

"Your visit is timely, as I have no other work at present which demands my attention. With your permission we will proceed at once. Of course I can tell but one fortune at a time, and I must ask the one of you not engaged to step just outside the door. All fortunes are told privately."

This arrangement was by no means satisfactory to the girls, who had expected to remain together, but Lois was surprised out of her usual calmness by seeing Ettala come to the front and say the arrangement was satisfactory, and that she would be the first to have the future unveiled.

What gave her this sudden rush of confidence she never knew, but the die was cast and she was soon alone with Hamed. Lois had retired to the outer room and the door was closed. Thus, while words spoken in an ordinary tone would reach only one hearer, Ettala had only to raise her voice to make it audible to her friend.

The Magician lost no time, but proceeded to manipulate an instrument which bore a dim resemblance to a photographer's camera, though larger, and intended, according to appearance, as a place in which the far-seer could view the panorama of the past, present and future.

He commenced to speak in a slow, deep voice, and glided lightly over the events of the past. He told some things which had actually occurred, but, as a rule, was not so minute as a fortune-teller should be.

Nearing the present, he grew more interesting.

"You are at present pleasantly situated. You have a friend who cares for you well, and loves you well, and you have little need to fight your own battles. You have a ready hand to help you. The future, however, is less favorable. I see dark clouds on the horizon of your life, and you are destined to know what trouble and sorrow are like."

"How trouble will come I cannot tell; that

much is not vouchsafed my vision; but I see a picture here where the one who is now your protector is no longer visible. You are in trouble and deem yourself friendless. Such is not the case, however. You are loved by a man who is noble and true, and who will supply the place of your other protector. I judge he has not yet made known his love, but when you need him he will appear in all his strength.

"The result is doubtful. I see that you will hesitate about accepting his protection, and all depends on your decision. If you do accept, all will be well, you will marry your would-be protector and a long and happy life will be yours. If, on the contrary, you decline, misery and continued trouble will be your lot. I can see no light to this picture, and I judge that your lot will be a wretched one. Thus your future, be it for weal or woe, depends on whether you accept the lover who will come to you. I can tell no more, but his face is pictured here on the mystic scroll, and, by looking, you may see your true lover. Come!"

CHAPTER IV.

A REVELATION OF THE PAST.

ETTALA had listened closely to all the Magician said, and she had been more affected than she had thought possible. She had come as a skeptic, but the somber surroundings of the fortune-teller, his own make-up, his slow, solemn utterance and his prophecy of trouble near at hand, had combined to influence her more than might be imagined.

She had grown nervous and ill at ease, and she wished herself well away, but she dared not interrupt the man of the dark science.

His last words had given her a start, and she made no move to obey his direction that she should look and see the face of the man who was to be her protector and her only means of escape from misery.

She was not aware that she had a lover, and she did not care to look upon one conjured up in such a way.

"Come!" repeated Hamed, in a gentler voice. "There is nothing to fear, child, and it may help you a good deal in the future."

Ettala arose and walked toward the camera-like instrument. Hamed stepped a little back, and then directed her where to look. She saw a glass surface which, at first, seemed to hide no more than vacancy, but as she pressed her face closer, what seemed like two enlarged photographs were presented to her view.

She recognized both.

One was her own likeness, as she then appeared, though she had not had a picture taken for five years.

The second was that of a man, young, comely and dashing, and Ettala started back as she recognized the face of Luke Burbank.

"Behold your friend, defender, lover!" said the Magician in a deep voice.

The girl did not answer. Her acquaintance with Burbank was slight, but she had never been favorably impressed, and it was not pleasant to have his face presented as that of one she must marry as the only means of avoiding misery.

"Look again," said Hamed. "The picture will soon fade, for it is one but of air, and it is well you should fix it firmly in your mind while the chance is yours."

Ettala obeyed. She looked long and earnestly, hoping she might be mistaken, but there was no room for doubt. The picture was that of Luke Burbank.

But while she looked, it, as well as her own, grew indistinct, and faded entirely away, leaving only vacancy behind the glass.

"It is finished!" said the Magician's even voice. "If you have doubted my power before, you will doubt no longer. I have a power vouchsafed to but few, but those who test it are greatly benefited, in that I show them the dangers which hover in their paths and the means of escape. I am done, and you can exchange places with your friend."

Ettala was not sorry to hear that the interview was over. She had been so affected that she had not thought of getting away, but now that the chance had come she lost no time.

In the meanwhile, Lois had been awaiting her return in the outer room. She sat near the door connecting with Hamed's quarters, while Sing-So hovered around the outside door. He did not address Lois, nor seem to look at her, and, thus far there could be no complaint that the place was not well-conducted.

When the two girls met, Ettala experienced a change of feeling and managed to smile lightly, and Lois went to the inner room with a feeling that she was about to be amused by a humbug.

Hamed's calmness had not changed, and he motioned her to a seat with a wave of his hand.

"Your name?" he evenly questioned.

"Lois Orme."

"Give the date and exact time of your birth."

She obeyed.

"It is enough," he calmly added. "I will now proceed. You were born at a time when the moon was at the full, and, as a consequence, I can read your past and future clearly. You were born of parents who could give you no

other heritage than poverty. I judge their marriage was a hasty and ill-advised one; perhaps there was a considerable difference in their worldly positions."

Lois frowned; the fact that he was getting uncomfortably near the truth was strange, but it was lost sight of in the fact that the truth was, in this case, unpleasant.

"Their married life was not a pleasant one," Hamed resumed; "for some reason they quarreled often and bitterly, and the result was that when you were six years of age your father deserted his family."

The girl made an imperious motion to stop the speaker, but the words with which she intended to follow it were checked. She resolved to hear all the Magician had to say.

"When he was gone your mother had to fight the world alone for herself and her child, yourself. It was a hard battle, I take it, but she persevered until her health failed, and she died. After that you went to live with a man who had been her patron while she lived, and who, in a measure, adopted you when you were left alone in the world. This man, whose name was Abram Selden, was a wealthy bachelor, of hermit inclinations.

"You were a child of eight years when you went to live with him, but I judge you were precocious. You soon adapted yourself to your new surroundings, and, as he was as kind as a father, your life was not an unhappy one, I think. Years passed and you grew to womanhood; the child of eight years became a young lady of twenty-two before anything of importance again occurred."

Thus far Lois had listened in surprise, for her past life was being minutely described, but with outward calmness. At this point, however, she began to show signs of uneasiness, and once she half-started from her chair as though to end the interview.

She seemed to change her mind, however, and Hamed calmly proceeded:

"At this stage of your affairs, two years ago, matters assumed a crisis. Two important facts are visible to me through the agency of the stars. You had a lover, and your aged protector began to fail physically. Naturally you were anxious as to the disposition he would make of his fortune. You had been reared as his child, and you felt that his money ought to become yours."

"Sir!" interrupted Lois, haughtily.

"I beg that you will remain silent. Recollect that this is a private interview; that what passes here is as sacred and secret as though I were a priest and you a confessor."

Hamed's voice, though even, was mild and persuasive.

"Confine yourself to facts, then," curtly advised the girl.

"You came here as an unbeliever," calmly returned the magician, "and as I seek money less than the practice of my craft, I freely say that you will pay nothing unless you are satisfied. Let me go on and tell what the stars reveal to me."

"I suspect they are liable to reveal rubbish, but as I have a curiosity to see how far wrong you will go, I promise to hear all you have to say."

The girl seemed to try to speak indifferently, but she was plucking at her shawl in a way which indicated that she was scarcely at ease.

"I will resume. Desiring Abram Selden's money, you spoke to your lover about the matter. He agreed with you that it would be an excellent thing with which to begin your career together in the world, but he had all of a manly young fellow's contempt for such a thing on general principles—the contempt of a young person who has not tried the world and learned what a power money is—and he declared that Selden must be allowed to dispose of his possessions as he saw fit.

"No one can blame you that you took an entirely different view, and when you found that Selden intended to give you but a meager portion, you resolved to take measures to obtain what was rightfully yours."

Lois by this time looked angry, but she had promised to remain silent and she intended to do so. One of her feet was tapping on the floor as though some vent to her feelings was necessary, but she kept her mouth tightly closed.

"About this time Roger Hillard, your lover, began to hear rumors that he was being supplanted in his place in your affection by another lover, a man named Charles Winter. For a time he let the matter rest, but he finally spoke to you about it. You acknowledged that you no longer cared for Hillard, and the engagement was then and there broken off. You left the place sooner than Hillard, and after you were gone he saw upon the ground a white paper of considerable bulk. He unfolded it, and saw what purported to be the last will and testament of Abram Selden, in which nearly all the latter's property was given to you. The will, however, was a forgery; the paper was the joint work of Charles Winter and yourself!"

Lois started excitedly to her feet.

"It is false!" she cried. "It is a base falsehood!"

"Remember our compact. You have prom-

ised to hear me patiently," the Magician calmly said.

"How can I when you make such charges?"

"I make none. No ears but our own hear me, and it is not my place to make known what the stars tell me. In any case the proof I have to offer would not be accepted in any court. Will you hear me through? I am interested in the case."

Lois hesitated for a moment.

"Go on!" she then said, curtly, reseating herself.

Hillard at once suspected that the paper he held was a forgery, and his first impulse was to place it in the hands of the law, but he felt some love for you still. So he returned the will to you, giving some advice with it.

Two days later Abram Selden was dead. Then a search was made for a will, but none was found. In such a case, his legal heirs claimed his property, assuring you of a fair living, and their claim was allowed. What did they find? Selden had been reputed to be worth thirty thousand dollars, but over twenty-five thousand had taken wings and fled."

CHAPTER V.

ENTER MOSE DEVLIN.

HAMED paused for a moment and looked at the girl, but she sat still and silent, her gaze fixed scornfully on his face. When it became evident that she did not intend to speak, he looked again inside his instrument.

"The estate upon which Selden lived, together with its equipments, was valued at between four and five thousand dollars. It had been believed that he had twenty-five thousand dollars in money, but no part of it could be found. The most careful search was made, but, when it failed, the heirs turned to you with suspicion. They accused you of having made way with it."

"Well?" said Lois, coldly.

"Assertion is one thing; proof is another. They could prove nothing, and you could not be arrested on suspicion which had so meager a foundation. No prosecution was attempted, but the heirs distinctly told you they were not done with you. One thing would have increased their suspicion had they known that Charles Winter had been your lover; that person had abruptly left the town. But the fact that you had favored him was known to but few, and Roger Hillard went to them and closed their mouths. He seems to have done so from the same motive which caused him to return the will—a lingering affection for you."

"Within two weeks from this time both Hillard and you had left the town, and in the lapse of time the Selden money mystery is almost forgotten, though not by the heirs. They remember a fortune of twenty-five thousand dollars they should have had, but did not get, and they believe its disappearance was owing to you. We now come to the future—"

"One question first," Lois interrupted.

"I am listening."

"You have mentioned my father who disappeared sixteen years ago, and has never been heard from. Where is he?"

"That I do not know; I am telling your fortune, not his. Neither can I tell you where Roger Hillard is."

The girl started slightly.

"I am not speaking of him," she quickly answered, "but it seems to me if you can reveal so much you should be able to trace the missing man—my father, I mean."

"Yet, I cannot. What does it matter? The fact that he left you as he did proves that he cared nothing for you; it is not likely he would be very eager to be united to you."

"You go too far when you appoint yourself a judge. What is it to you?"

"Nothing."

Hamed spoke as calmly as though he was a machine, but his face was turned toward her and she felt that he was watching her closely from behind his blue spectacles.

"Enough then, I will not trouble you to 'reveal' the future, for you have already proved that you are what my common-sense told me from the first was the case—a humbug. Fortune-telling is nothing more, with the best. As for what you have told me, you have at some time become possessed of certain facts and rumors of my early life. That you are an impostor is proven by the fact that you have given the version of the affair presented by my enemies, not the facts of the case. I have no more to say!"

She had spoken sharply, but the Magician did not seem in the least moved.

He bowed low, but with dignity.

"As you will," he evenly answered.

Before more could be said there was a sound of loud voices in the outer room, and then the door connecting with it was dashed open and Ettala hurriedly entered.

She was about to speak, but, before she could do so, a loud voice from the first room attracted the attention of all.

"Get out o' ther way, ye slip-noose j'nted heathen, an' let me at ther magical Magician's tent. Ef I see ye standin' thar two seconds

longer, I'll fall on ye like Pike's Peak on a jack-rabbit an' snatch ye bald-headed. I'm Mose Devlin, I be, an' I'm a slugger from Slung-sho City. I'm ther man who knocked out Tom O'Sullivan in four rounds. I'm a double-distilled extract o' Maori an' Prussian, spiced with eighteen-carat blizzard pepper, an' ef my fist draps on ye thar'll be a funeral in ther pig tail destrict right away. You hear me, John Chin Shangho?"

Hamed strode to the door and looked out.

Sing-So was holding an intruder at bay. The latter was a white man, or could have been transformed into one by judicious use of soap and water.

He was a man of middle-age; a broad-shouldered, long-armed, burly fellow; not tall, but very powerfully built, and looked like what he claimed to be—a "slugger."

A more ill-favored, lawless-looking tough had never been seen in Bowlder Bar, but, though he shook a ponderous fist under Sing-So's nose, the Celestial faced him unwaveringly.

"You gitee out o' here, or me takee you by ear and slingee you off ledge-ee!" Sing-So announced.

"You will? You? Wal, I should smile ter grin! Way, ye couldn't sling ther ear alone, ef I wasn't bitched onter it. I want ter thunder in yer tin-panners that I'm a professional pugilist, an' a bad man with a hole in my left boot. I've fought thirty-seven battles an' never been licked, an' I've helped start twenty graveyards. Ever hear on me? Most everybody knows Mose Devlin, an' them ez knows him shakes all ther buttons off their waistcoats when they hear him holler. I say git out o' ther way, an' what I sez goes ez it lays!"

Mr. Devlin drew back his fist as though about to sacrifice Sing-So on the altar of his anger, but Hamed abruptly strode forward.

"What do you want here?" he demanded.

The pugilist transferred his attention from man to master, but his unsteady gaze and unsteady legs betrayed the fact that he had drank far more liquor than was good for him.

"Hallo, old Ku-klux Kalamazoo!" was his greeting. "Hyar ye be with yer night-cap on, ain't ye? Durn yer, I want my fortin told; that's what I want. I desire to know what salubrious good luck is cipherin' around on ther Aurora Borealis horizon o' my future; ter know ef I'll be 'lecteet President in 1884, an' ef fishes kin swim—"

"That is enough. I do not deal with drunken men, and you can take yourself off as soon as you see fit."

Devlin made an effort to leap up and crack his heels together, but his limbs were weak and he barely escaped a fall by staggering against the wall.

"What?" he shouted.

"The door is open; you can go!" coldly answered the Magician, who did not seem in the least alarmed.

"I ain't goin' this week so much ez I was. I'm hyar to bev my fortin told, an' hev it told I will ef I hev ter pull it outer ye with a cable-chain. Whoop her up, an' let me see ther future unvailed."

"I shall do nothing of the kind, nor will I have you here. Go, at once!"

"Go?"

"Yes."

"Mebbe you kin make me go."

"We can, and shall, and you will not fare well if we have to resort to force," Hamed answered.

"Me kickee you ten times in seben minutes, an' wipe allee dust up wid you," Sing-So added.

Devlin laughed with a roar which almost shook the building, for his well-developed lungs were not so drunk as his legs.

"I should smile ter see ye try it on; you'd weep a Missouri river-full o' tears fur yer brashness. Durn ye, ye needn't think ye've got ther earth 'cause ye own this one-hoss house on a rock. Not any. Ef I take hold o' you thar'll be a fallin' apart o' bones. I'm Mose Devlin, pugilist, an' a bad man with a hole in my boot. Tell my fortin, or out goes yer lights, an' down goes yer durned shanty inter Mud river. You hear me?"

Hamed, who remained unmoved, glanced at his Chinese follower. Sing-So was equally calm.

"We shall have to throw him out," he said.

"We do that welly quickee," Sing-So replied.

"It'll be ther slowest quick-trip ye ever saddled, ye durned Hoang-Bazoo!" declared the pugilist. "It takes a man eleven feet in his boots, with a tin ear, ter move one side o' me. Keep away from ther slugger from Slung-shot City. I'm a bad man with a hole in my boot!"

During this parley Lois and Ettala had been standing side by side. Both were thoroughly frightened, for Mose Devlin was a man before whom even those of his own sex might excusably cower, and they wished they were safely out of the Magician's quarters.

They had looked in vain for a place of exit other than the door, but none was visible and they were forced to remain and hear all of the drunken brute's explosive talk.

Toward the last, however, he moved some-

what to one side to avoid being thrown out, and they did not fail to perceive their chance.

Moving together they glided through the door unperceived by either Hamed or the Chinaman. Devlin did see them, and that, too, for the first time, and he stared after them so blankly that he entirely forgot his guard.

It was a chance Hamed did not neglect, for, though he had abundant courage, he was inclined to do justice to the strength Devlin displayed. It was just as well to take him off his guard if possible.

He made a motion to Sing-So and they sprung forward together.

Another moment and the pugilist found himself struggling in their grasp, but it was only a brief contest. Both his assailants were muscular men, and almost in the twinkling of an eye he was flung out of the door.

He fell heavily, but, considering his condition, was up quickly. He was full of wrath, and he had picked up a stone with the intention of beating in the door, which had been closed, when he caught sight of Lois and Ettala hurrying down the ledge.

"Hal ha! hyar's better game!" he exclaimed, as he hurried after them as fast as possible.

As a pursuer, he was not much better than a tiger.

CHAPTER VI.

GIANT DAVE.

THE fleeing girls were making all possible speed, but they were not accustomed to such work, and Madrock Ledge was not a place of secure footing. Chasms yawned in their path here and there, while at one side there was an abrupt slope down to where Mad river flung its waters against the rock.

A fall might do untold mischief.

Devlin was not affected by any such prudence. Always reckless and hot-headed, what prudence he possessed was crowded back for the time by the load of liquor he had aboard, and he dashed down over the ledge as though it had been the best of roads.

Nevertheless, with the start they had they reached the level before he overtook them. Then he came rushing down like a tornado.

"Hollo, thar; hold up! Stop the train until ther superintendent gits aboard. Throw up ther grappin'-irons an' stop ther engine. I'm Mose Devlin, an' I'm a sweet-scented dandy with a rose in my button-hole. You hear me holler, an' hyar I be!"

He was there, for he had overtaken them at the moment he commenced speaking, and seized both of them in a hold which they endeavored in vain to break.

"Easy on ther right flank," he added. "Don't rile me up, or thar'll be a row in the synagogue. I'm a bad man with a hole in my boot, when my mad is up."

"Let us go!" exclaimed Lois, more indignant than frightened. "Release us, or I will cry for help."

"Do it, my charmer, an' I'll come in on ther chorus. Call fur help; I'd like ter see ther two-legged galoot that dares tackle me. I'm Mose Devlin, ther champion pugilist, an' I'm an earthquake let out of school when I git wrathful. Be quiet, my darlings, an' let me take ye to my manly breast—"

He ceased speaking abruptly. He was proceeding to carry out his indicated purpose when he received a sharp blow from Lois's hand which made him stagger.

He uttered a roar of rage and all his evil passions came to the front. He was in a condition where prudence was unknown, and he was not to be kept back by any fear of consequences.

Sharp as had been his rebuff he had not released his hold, and he was about to carry matters to an extreme point, when a new actor appeared on the scene. The trio were too deeply interested to see him, but a large man strode toward the spot, and, seeming to understand the scene at a glance, laid hold of Devlin and cast his several feet away, evidently finding the pugilist's huge bulk no impediment to his purpose.

The girls experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling. His coming was most timely, and as they recognized a village miner of good repute, as well as abundant muscle, they felt that they were, indeed, saved.

The new-comer must have gone at least an inch over six feet, and his frame was admirably proportioned, but it needed but a short time to discover that his size was not attended by the slowness, or clumsiness, usual to large men.

The chance was open for the girls to beat a retreat, but neither of them seemed to think of it. They knew the trouble was not yet over, and they remained to see how their champion would maintain his position.

Devlin staggered to his feet and looked at the man who had flung him down. He was mad with rage, but his repeated falls were beginning to have effect and his head was not so clear as could be desired.

He looked at the new comer for a moment in silence.

"So it's you, Giant Dave?" he then said, slowly,

"Yas," answered the champion, in a mild voice.

"You're ther man that dared ter fling me—me, ther compressed essence o' Maori and Prussian; ther man who knocked out Tom O'Sullivan in four rounds?"

"I had ter do it," said Giant Dave, in an apologetic voice.

"You had ter thunder!" was the vague answer. "Don't go ter givin' me any taffy. Don't ye know that when ye laid a hand on me ye sealed yer fate?"

"I hope thar won't be no trouble," said Dave hesitatingly. "I have no quarrel with ye, but, o' course, I couldn't stand idle an' see ther ladies abused."

"Ladies! Oh! you durned idiot, Dave Bond, go an' git some brains inter yer head. What call has a rough-an'-ready chap like you ter be a knight-errant? Scud out o' this, afore I set down on ye heavy."

"Go away yourself an' let them alone," said Dave, "an' then I'll go, too. I ain't a fightin'-man, an' I don't want no trouble, but you must let them go."

His manner was not calculated to impress Devlin with the idea that he had the "sand" to carry out his purpose, for he spoke hesitatingly, even apologetically, and the pugilist began to count on a double triumph.

"You're modest, you be; a reg'lar timid school-girl. Anything else you want? Why don't ye ask fur ther earth? Now, you hear me, Dave Bond. I'm a bad man with a hole in my boot, an' when I rise up in my wrath fer ter devour, thar is generally a rattlin' o' dry bones. I won't bev yer chippin' in hyar. Keep ter yerself, or thar'll be a heap o' blood spilled. I'll lay ye out ez I would a wolf."

"I ain't sure ye could," said Giant Dave, mildly. "But that don't count. Me and you don't want no trouble. Why should we hav trouble—"

"Oh! you dry up!" interrupted Devlin, in disgust. "I hev heerd you talk afore. I know you ain't got ther sand o' a blind mouse, an' you know it, too. So you'd better take yerself off. Do I see ye goin'?"

"No, ye don't," said Bond, more firmly than before. "I sha'n't leave ther ladies till they're safe. Gals, ef ye'll start fur ther village, I'll see ye safe thar."

The giant had turned to Lois and Ettala as he spoke, and his voice was lowered; but Devlin's quick ears caught what he said.

"Ye will, eh? We'll see about that. I'll break you in two fur that, Dave Bond!"

He rushed forward as he spoke, and a cry of alarm broke from Ettala's lips as she saw a knife in his hand. The hesitating, mild manner of their champion had given her the idea that his massive frame was not accompanied by a warlike spirit, and she expected to see him cut down at once.

Bond, however, stood firm, and as the pugilist reached him he thrust out his powerful arms suddenly. One hand closed over Devlin's knifewrist and the weapon was wrested away, and then he raised him as though he had been a child.

One moment the bully was suspended struggling in the air, and then he was cast several feet away with such force that he lay motionless where he fell.

Dave looked at him in silence for awhile.

"I had ter do it," he then muttered.

Something about his peculiar ways impelled Ettala to move forward to his side impulsively.

"You have done nobly," she said, "and I thank you most earnestly. You were very brave to face that man, and you conquered him gallantly."

"I hope he isn't hurt," said the champion, still looking at the fallen man.

"What if he is?" sharply asked Lois. "Didn't he deserve it?"

Bond turned, took off his hat and brushed the hair from his forehead with a motion quicker than was his custom.

"He sartainly deserved punishment," he replied, "but I wouldn't be ther man ter do it. I ain't a fightin' man, an' only that he was mervestin' you two I wouldn't hev laid a hand on him. But I couldn't stand that, an' if he's hurt he has only himself ter blame."

"You certainly are not to blame," said Ettala warmly. "It is brave and noble to defend those too weak to care for themselves."

Bond turned his hat over awkwardly, but his gaze was fixed steadfastly on her face.

"That's a good doctrine," he said.

"It is the true one, and nobody can blame you for practicing it."

"But you see I hev a hot temper, an'— But, never mind; we won't speak o' that. I'll see ye safe home, an' I thank ye kindly fur yer good words. I ain't always got so many on 'em ez I might."

"I'm sure you deserve them."

"Wal, I don't know; I'm tryin' ter do about what's right, but it's rayther a hard road ter travel in this rough country, 'specially whar one ain't got no friends."

"But you have friends. You have made two to-night who will be true ones, as far as possible."

Ettala's course was a general surprise. It was a surprise to Lois, who had been accustomed to see her friend follow, rather than lead, in conversation; it was one to the younger girl herself, who had no time as yet to analyze her sudden interest in her champion; and that he was affected in the same way was shown by the manner in which he looked at her.

"You're very kind, but I'm only Dave Bond, a miner who's a-diggin' hard fur his bread, miss," he said.

"Do you suppose we respect you less for that? No; all men are human; none can be more."

"I won't furgit this," said Giant Dave, with more energy. "You speak kindly, an' I know how ter appreciate sech. Besides, you remind me o'— But never mind. Hyar we be at yer house, an' I reckon I ain't needed no more. Thar ain't no sign o' Mose Devlin."

They had, indeed, arrived at the post-office, and both the girls were glad their night's adventures were over. It had been settled that Lois should remain with Ettala that night, and there was no further danger for her.

Dave took leave of them at the door, and their good words were renewed; but he walked away like one in a dream. Had Devlin been near then, and seeking revenge, it is not sure but he would have accomplished his object, for Bond was thinking far more of Ettala than of his own safety. But Devlin did not appear.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ADVENTURE ON THE TRAIL.

Two days later when the stage left Foolscap Bend for Bowlder Bar, Tim Shea had four passengers aboard. One of them, a rough-looking fellow in miner's dress, climbed to the box beside the prince of the reins, while the other three took position inside the vehicle.

Of these three, one was a repetition of the party on the box; a miner, one would say, though scarcely an interesting specimen. This man had already announced that his name was Bill Wild.

A second man was one who might have been mistaken for a minister, so far as his dress went, but from his habit of dropping into nautical expressions now and then, it seemed that his ministerial clothes were not a criterion.

The last of the travelers was a manly-looking fellow with long hair and a heavy mustache; a neat, somewhat expensive, but not gaudy, suit of clothes; and the general air of a man who has seen a good deal of the world and had his eyes sharpened thereby.

He leaned back in the corner of the stage and seemed to be as indolent a man as was to be found anywhere in Montana, but Bill Wild, who was a man with an inquiring turn of mind, did not fail to perceive that he was well armed. Two bright-barreled revolvers glistened in his belt, and though the plating might be nickel, Bill suspected it was silver. Such weapons were rarely seen, and his fingers fairly itched to possess them."

"Go'in' ter Bowlder Bar ter settle, gents?" he asked, sociably, after a period of silence.

The man who looked like a minister glanced at the long-haired man, as though anxious he should answer, but the latter had closed his eyes and seemed asleep, so he had to reply or let the question go unanswered.

"I don't know," he said, curtly.

"Only travelin', prehaps?"

"Yes."

"Might I inquire whar you're from?"

"The East."

"Oh! Good place, that, but ther West lays it over, if a man kin git acclimated. I didn't ketch yer name."

"Very likely, for I gave none, but if it will be of any use to you, call me Lovering."

The man in the corner suddenly unclosed his eyes.

"Mr. Wild," said he, with ceremonious politeness, as he addressed the questioner, "if you are preparing a Directory, put me down as Silver-Plated Sol, beggar, late of Poverty Flat, Poor-house county, Montana."

The inquisitive man was momentarily taken aback, but he had met with trying ordeals before, and he rallied with commendable alacrity after a short time devoted to staring at the man in the corner.

"Silver-Plated Sol, eh?" he said, his gaze dropping to the man's belt. "Mebbe you git yer name from ther shooters I see thar?"

"Just so. They are plated with silver, but they're loaded, as I'll show you if any meddlesome individual by the road happens to mix in. When I shoot there's nothing leit to mend."

Wild had a dim idea that this was a round-about way of telling him to keep to himself, but he was in a sociable mood and not inclined to obey. He wanted to talk, and he seemed to prefer Silver-Plated Sol as his chief listener, and he kept it up until that gentleman metaphorically came out of his coil and talked.

He did it in a way which almost stunned Wild. The latter prided himself on being a veteran miner, but in all his experience he had never heard such Munchausen-like yarns as Sol

related, and as he could not match them he felt as helpless as a child.

Lovering, as the elder traveler had called himself, listened for the greater part of the time stoically, though a grave smile now and then crossed his face. Forty years of his life had been passed in wandering over the wide world and he had heard exaggerated stories before, but he understood that Sol considered Wild a bore and desired to stun him.

In a measure he succeeded, for silence soon fell over the party. Sol Colton closed his eyes and seemed to sleep, and Lovering gazed out of the stage at the scenery in a thoughtful way. Wild alone remained wide awake, and his gaze often wandered to Sol's revolvers.

He remembered and coveted them.

In due time they reached the rough country which hangs around Wolf's-back Ridge. There the trail grows eccentric and tortuous. To avoid chasms and unscalable cliffs it winds around as though ambitious to rival a corkscrew, and the scenery is a wild combination of rocks and trees.

Half-way through the place the stage came to a sudden halt, and the inside passengers at once became on the alert. The same thought was in both Colton's and Lovering's minds, and their hands sought their revolvers.

"Road-agents?" questioned the latter.

It was a natural question. He was a stranger to Montana, and he had come there expecting to see nearly every bush garrisoned by one of the far-famed light-fingered profession.

"If so, it's no surrender with me," said Silver-Plated Sol, sturdily. "I don't carry valuables, but I hate the idea of being worsted. Aha! here they come!"

The stage-door was opened, but, instead of a masked and terrible robber, they saw the honest face of Tim Shea.

"There's an ax under the seat which I want, gents," he announced.

"Allow me to ax why?" said Bill Wild, with a desperate attempt to be funny.

"Thar's a fallen tree across our path, and she must be cut away before we kin go on."

So saying, the driver secured the ax and vanished, and the passengers unanimously turned out to see what had been done and what must be done.

As Shea had said, a tree lay directly across their path, and there was no passing until it was removed. It was not large, however, and Tim cheerfully assured them that he could cut it in two in five minutes. Then he swung his ax aloft and the battle commenced.

Silver-Plated Sol stood idly for a moment and then ascended the steep bank at the right. It was at this point that the tree had stood before its fall, and he looked carelessly to see where it had broken off. Then he made a discovery. It had not been broken off at all; it had been cut with an ax.

It did not require deep meditation to tell him that some one had felled it on purpose to block the trail. Why it had been done was uncertain. Other travelers besides the stage passed that way, and the last-mentioned vehicle might not have had anything to do with it.

Granted that it had been done to block the stage, what had been the motive? Possibly it was all a joke on Tim Shea; possibly there was some deeper meaning to it.

Sol resolved to inform the driver at once, but to do it in a quiet way and unheard by the other passengers. Then Tim could use his own judgment about making the discovery public.

He moved down the bank, but just as he reached the trail again Shea severed the log.

"Now, gents," said he, "if you'll give me a lift I'll soon have you in motion ag'in."

He looked around for his passengers. Sol was at hand, and Lovering sat on a boulder a few yards away, but Bill Wild and the late box-passenger were not visible.

Shea raised his voice and called them, but there was no answer; so, while they waited, Sol made known the cause of the fall of the tree.

The driver at once became interested.

"Thar's some mischief afoot. That never was done fur nothin', an' though I never heerd o' road agents along this trail, we may as well keep our eyes open after this. Whar's them two passengers? Hey they crawled inter ther wagon and gone ter sleep?"

No one seemed to know, and he strode toward the vehicle to ascertain, though such a thing seemed hardly possible. As he passed the box, however, he stopped short, and Sol saw a look of consternation appear on his face.

"What's the trouble?" the rover asked.

"Ther mail-bag is gone!"

Tim uttered the words with a vehemence which left no doubt as to what he thought of its disappearance; he did not expect to find it readily, and he was alarmed at the loss.

"When did you see it last?" Colton asked.

"It was thar when I got off to get ther ax, an'— I say, whar's Wild an' Leach?"

He asked the question with the abruptness of one who has gained a sudden idea, and, before they could answer, he explained the idea by explosively adding:

"They're ther ones that took ther mail-bag, an' I see now why ther tree was cut. Wild and

Leach was mail-robbers, an' by ther etarnal, their game has worked wal, and they've got the mail!"

"I take it the fellin' of the tree was a part of the game," said Silver-Plated Sol, who had become interested.

"Right you be. They had a confederate who did that; the idee being ter git my attention away while they got the mail-bag. They knew no man could take it from me while I sat on ther box."

While speaking the driver had been looking all about, hoping to see the robbers somewhere as they made their retreat, but he looked in vain.

"Well, what're you going to do about it?" Sol asked.

"Ef I ever see them scoundrels I'm goin' ter bore them plum' through!" Shea viciously declared.

"Strikes me the easiest way is to drop on them at once."

"Can you foller a trail?"

"No."

"Nur I."

"I can!"

It was Lovering who spoke, and as it came so suddenly, after his long silence, both men started.

"I dare say I know as much about trailin' as any man in Montana—perhaps more, for I can trail on sea or land," he added. "I didn't ship on this voyage as a pilot, but if you say the word I'll hunt your mail-robbers down in the flap of a dry sail."

CHAPTER VIII.

TRAILING THE MAIL ROBBERS.

TIM SHEA was not the man to neglect a chance, and he answered almost before the last words were out of Lovering's mouth.

"Do that an' I'll give ye my year's wages."

"Never mind that, for I don't care for the bonanza. I have all the money I want, but a mail-robber is one of the meanest men on shoe-leather, and I shall be glad to chip in and foil them."

"It can't be done by standing here," said Sol, who was of a more energetic nature than the others. "Every moment adds to their chances of escape."

Shea was wise enough to discover the truth of this, and he promptly pulled his team to one side, tied the horses to a sapling and announced that he was ready to follow the volunteer guide.

Silver-Plated Sol was inclined to look upon the venture as a foolish one. To him, Lovering did not look like a man capable of the necessary work. Either he had been a sailor, or else he affected nautical terms. If the former, it was not likely he knew much about life on the Western hills.

The guide, however, showed a good deal of quiet confidence, and in a short time he announced that he had found the trail. He led the way up the face of the ridge, a short distance back of the stage, and there, sure enough, they found footprints in the soft soil. Lovering pronounced them freshly made, and they pushed on with more zeal.

The course of the robbers—if they were, indeed, on their trail—had been due north, and Shea began to bewail because they were going straight to the wildest part of Wolf's-back Ridge. He knew there were many places there where the robbers could hide if they saw fit, and if they discovered that they were pursued they would be likely to take measures to defeat those who followed.

Silver-Plated Sol was inclined to be a skeptic and he watched Lovering with some doubt. Were they really on the trail of the robbers? It seemed so, but, if such was the fact, the man was showing a talent for tracking which was really remarkable, and least of all to be expected from him.

The rover, however, began to have a vague suspicion that it would do no harm to watch Lovering, while the others watched for the robbers. He might be all right, and then, again, he might be an ally of the men who had stolen the mail-bag.

So the youngest of the trio drew and secretly examined his silver-plated revolvers, and the pursuit was steadily continued with him as a rear guard in a double sense.

Luckily for the pursuers, the robbers had not for a moment suspected that they would be so sharply followed. When, by a rapid retreat, they left the immediate vicinity of the theft behind, they had supposed that they were comparatively safe; that there was one of the party that could follow a trail like an old plainsman had not occurred to them.

Nevertheless, those who went with Lovering soon found that he had made no vain boast, for he came to a halt on a little point of land and put out his hand to indicate the necessity of caution.

"They're there," he quietly said.

"Whar?" Shea demanded.

Lovering pointed, and as the driver and Sol looked over the rise they saw the robbers in a gulch. They already had the mail-bag open, having slashed it with a knife, and were too deep,

in the work of examination to see the three heads which arose cautiously above the rocks.

Shea drew his revolver with a jerk.

"What now?" Lovering asked.

"I'll drop one of them if you two will attend to the other."

"It would be a mighty good shot to do it at that distance," said Sol, coolly. "If you'll take my advice we will do better than that. Those fellows haven't a suspicion of smoke in the air; if we work well, we can make a surround and rope them both in. A mail-robber is a mean galoot, I acknowledge, but I'd rather see him a prisoner than to have his blood on my hands. I'm no red slayer."

"Your way is the best," said Lovering, quickly. "We can make the surround and take both."

"So be it," answered Shea, though not with good grace; he was anxious to take speedy revenge. "How shall we do it?"

It was settled that he should go to the left and Lovering to the right, while silver-plated Sol should keep his position and prepare to receive and intimidate the robbers when the "surround" had been made. If it was a success, Wild and Leach would have no chance except to move toward the rover.

He saw his allies go away and then settled down to wait for the result. Despite his assertion that he was not a "red slayer," he was a man who had seen a good deal of wild life and never failed to keep his end up; and he awaited as coolly as though it were a minor matter.

He watched Shea and Lovering closely, however, and he soon perceived that the latter was showing a singular want of prudence for a veteran trailer.

He was treading near the wall of the gulch and keeping watch of the robbers, when it seemed that he should have kept well back where they could by no possibility discover him.

"What's he thinking of?" muttered the rover. "If one of them happens to look up, the game is lost."

Even as he spoke a loose stone, disturbed by Lovering's feet, went rattling down the bank, and both robbers leaped to their feet. After that the result did not admit of doubt. They saw Lovering and could not but know why he was there, and in a moment the break came.

The scattered mail was forgotten in a desire to save their own heads, and the two went dashing down the gulch at full speed. Then Lovering seemed to arouse; he drew his revolver and fired several shots after them; but his aim could not have been first-class, for they kept on without trouble.

Sol Colton was out of the game, and he arose and sauntered down the gulch toward the prematurely-distributed mail.

But Wild and Leach were not out of danger. The sound of the revolver had given the alarm to Shea, and that gentleman was certainly not lukewarm, if the other trailers were. He rushed to the edge of the gulch with blood in his eye and a revolver in his hand, and as the robbers came abreast of him he opened fire.

At that distance it was all a matter of chance, and the probable failure of the plan to capture them had had an unfavorable effect on Shea's nerves, and when he blazed away the bullets went wild.

The robbers, however, were not disposed to act a wholly passive part, and they drew in turn and a lively fire ensued. They were doggedly stubborn, and, had it not been for the fact that Lovering was seen advancing, might have made it a fight to the death with Shea.

As it was, discretion seemed better than valor, and they turned and dashed down the gulch at full speed.

The bloodless fight was over.

In the mean while, Silver-Plated Sol had halted by the new post-office. Wild and Leach had made good use of their time and scattered things promiscuously. The rover picked up two of three of the letters and looked at them with careless curiosity.

The first was of a business nature, and referred to mining matters, and he let it drop after a glance. Probably the second would have shared the same fate had he not caught sight of a name which at once interested him.

Red Summit! The name of the village where Roger Hillard had lived and died—murdered by persons unknown. His friend, who was on a trail calculated to reveal their identity, did not pass the letter by as he had done the first, but he looked and read with interest.

This was the letter:

"A. B. C.—There is great excitement here over the death of H—. It seems he was a favorite, or, at least, was a quiet man who did not make enemies. The sheriff is looking into the case, but he is an ignorant fellow more noted for muscle than brains. No danger from him. The man most to be feared is a sport named Colton, usually called Silver-Plated Sol. He has taken up the crusade and vows to find out who did the mischief. He is a man to be feared, for his natural keenness has been augmented by long life in a rough-and-ready way. He has left Red Summit, and is off on the trail of a certain man and woman. Look out for him. He is a young man, or, at least, under thirty, rather good-looking, with long black hair and a huge mustache. He also carries two silver-plated revolvers; by these

signs you may know him. Look a little out, for, though I am unacquainted with him, I can plainly see he is a bad one. Do not venture to answer this, but keep a little shady and I will report when there is anything new."

X. Y. Z."

CHAPTER IX.

DOUBTS AND DANGERS.

SILVER-PLATED SOL read this letter with unabating interest. For two weeks he had been on the trail of the man and woman whom he supposed guilty of Roger Hillard's murder. At any rate, they had left Red Summit immediately after the tragedy, and had traveled north in an extremely secret way. Their caution betrayed the fact that they had something to conceal, but it had also prevented Sol from getting a personal description of either, and the last he learned about them had merely led him to believe they had gone to Bowlder Bar.

When he learned this he had strong hopes that he had followed them to their lair. Bowlder Bar was an out-of-the-way place, which had no connection with the outside world except by Tim Shea's stage.

Surely, they would not go there unless it was where they intended to remain, and he had taken the stage with the fixed belief that the battle was about to be open formally.

It only remained to identify them.

The letter was an important event in many respects. It proved that he was on the trail. Sent to Bowlder Bar, it meant that the assassins were there, and the fact that the author said "do not venture to answer this, but keep a little shady and I will report when there is anything new," proved that they intended to remain there.

Sol saw Lovering and Shea returning, and he secretly thrust the letter in his pocket. He had done well to intercept it, for "X. Y. Z." had conveyed such definite information that it would at once put the assassins on their guard.

He was resolved that it should not reach them, but just how he was to proceed he did not know. No identity was revealed by the letter. Who was A. B. C.? Who was X. Y. Z.? He tried to think of some man at Red Summit who would be likely to write such a letter, but the attempt was a failure.

"Just now I see no way except to write a decoy letter, take the Bowlder Bar postmaster into my confidence to a certain degree, and see what can be done. Since this is written to A. B. C. some one must be watching for a letter thus addressed. Well, if the postmaster will tell me who calls for it, I shall then have Roger Hillard's assassin on the hip."

The other two men now arrived, and Shea looked ruefully at the scattered letters.

"Begorra," he said, breaking into a long-forgotten brogue in his excitement, "it's mesilf has niver sane sech doin's sence I tuk dhe ribbons. Dhe sanctitude ave dhe United States mail has been voy'lated, an' Oi'm dhe man that'll have satisfaction if I worruk for it tin years aferther Oi'm dead an' burried."

"You'll have to do better work than the last, or the robbers will win every heat," Sol observed.

Shea looked sulkily at Lovering.

"Dhere was an almighty blunder," he said.

"Don't growl any more," said Lovering, curtly. "I helped you to recover the mail, and if an accident of mine frightened off the robbers, it ought to be forgiven."

The driver hastened to apologize, but Lovering did not heed him. He was looking closely at the scattered letters, and only ceased as Shea began replacing them in the mutilated bag. As he did so his gaze met that of Colton, and there was that in the rover's face which made him start and turn abruptly away.

"A queer fish," thought Sol, "and I am not so sure that he is on the square. I would be willing to swear he intentionally gave the alarm to Wild and Leach, were it not for the fact that he guided us here. I don't know what to think, though I suspect he will bear watching—but what do I care? It's none of my business, and I'll keep to myself."

Shea replaced the mail, unconscious of the fact that one letter was resting in Sol's pocket, and then the trio returned to where they had left the stage.

No harm had come to the outfit while they were away, and they were soon in their old places and rolling on toward Bowlder Bar.

Sol and Lovering were once more companions inside the vehicle, but, though they talked of the late adventure, there was an awkwardness about it which neither could have explained, though the matter lay in the fact that the elder man was under suspicion and realized the fact, but all was vague.

By that time they might be considered well acquainted, but neither explained the object of his visit to Bowlder Bar.

The village was reached in due time and both put up at the Flowing Bowl Hotel, but, from the time they arrived, they went different ways and had nothing in common.

Colton went at once to his room and, with a cigar to help his thoughts, tried to map out his course for the future. The possession of the letter gave him a start toward success if he

could use it aright. He felt sure he had reached the lair of Roger Hillard's murderers, and care and time were all that was necessary to find them.

Of course, the chief matter for consideration was whether he should seek the aid of the postmaster, and ask him to let him know who might call for a letter addressed to "A. B. C.," but he had a natural dislike to placing confidence in any one and decided not to be in haste.

While thus considering the matter he was not aware that his arrival in town had produced a sensation in a certain quarter, but such was the fact. Among those who saw him alight from the stage was Luke Burbank, and the gambler's face fell perceptibly.

He watched the rover into the hotel, and then stood staring hard at vacancy.

"Silver-Plated Sol! Yes, he's here, and it's not hard to imagine his motive. He is a regular sleuth-hound; I did not expect to see him strike the trail so soon. Now, what effect will this have on my case? Why, if he nabs Joe Danforth my hold on the latter becomes a broken reed, and I have no chance for winning Ettala. Curse the fellow! what evil wind sent him here?"

Luke ground his heel viciously into the ground as though he had the rover's head beneath it, and would bruise it past cure.

"There's only one way; the danger must be met and averted. Silver-Plated Sol must lose the game—and his life. Without him I have Danforth under my thumb, but the moment he gets in his work I am left. Result, Sol must be taken in out of the wet!"

Burbank was a man of prompt action, and he at once made his way to the post-office.

Joseph Danforth was there and alone, but as the usual hour for closing had arrived, he already had the key in his hand. A troubled look crossed his face, for, ever since Burbank's demand upon him, he had thoroughly feared him.

The gambler, however, had never been more self-possessed.

"That's right; lock up; but take the precaution to lock ourselves in. I have a word for your private ear."

"What is it now?" Danforth desperately asked.

"Nothing that need make you look like a hunted wolf. You have an idea in your head that I am persecuting you, and it sticks. Put it away; I am going to prove that I'm your best friend. If you had no worse, you'd be lucky."

By that time they were locked in, free from all prying eyes.

"Well, what is it?" the postmaster curtly asked.

"What should it be but the Red Summit affair? Murder will out, and when a man dips in he usually finds himself in hot water, metaphorically speaking, for the balance of his natural lifetime. Now, as I say, I am your friend, but did it ever occur to you that others might seek you out on the same affair?"

"I have not admitted that I was ever at Red Summit," was the half-defiant reply.

"Of course not; you would be a fool if you did, as matters stood before. But the scene has changed. Before the stage stopped here to-night it dropped two passengers at the Flowing Bowl. One was a man named, or called, Silver-Plated Sol. Do you know who he is?"

"No."

"Never heard the name?"

"No."

"Luckily, I have. I happen to know he was the friend of Roger Hillard, and the man who discovered that Hillard had been salivated. Furthermore, he swore that he would avenge the murder and bring the murderers to justice, and he has got so far as to arrive at Bowlder Bar!"

Danforth sat gazing at his companion with a look of terror on his face.

"Are you his agent?" he asked.

"I?"

"Yes."

"Nonsense! No, I am not. I am your friend—his enemy; and it is to lay plans to foil him that I am here. You and I must form an alliance, and then I'll help you all I can, remembering that you are Ettala's brother. I don't believe this Sol knows just who killed Hillard. He has traced them, and, probably, has discovered that they came to this town. If he knew more, he would have pounced on you the first thing. Now, we must give him no chance to do so. We must spike his guns before he knows upon whom to bring them to bear. See?"

Danforth nodded, but his air was hopeless. He had little of the strength of character possessed by his companion, and, beset on all sides, felt like surrendering all at one stroke. Consequently, half that was said was unheard by him.

"You have never given me a definite answer as to whether I can have Ettala for my wife," Burbank slowly added. "Perhaps you'll do so now."

Joseph wished his sister well, but he was not by any means the man to consider another's welfare when his own was at stake. He de-

cided that Ettala must be sacrificed to save him.

"You have a better head for planning than I have," he answered, "and if you'll take charge of this affair and—-and save me, I'll do all in my power to help you with Ettala."

"Done!" said the gambler, quickly, as he put out his hand. "I am just at home dealing with such cases as this Silver-Plated Sol, but women don't seem to cotton to me. Ettala will obey you, however, right from the word go, and what you say will go as it lays."

"But what of Silver-Plated Sol?" asked Joseph, whose mind refused to dwell on matrimonial subjects just then.

"That's easily answered," Burbank coolly replied. "One man from Red Summit is in the way and must be made to get out of it. I'll see to that, and you may count him as one deeply lamented—-gone to join his forefathers."

CHAPTER X.

IN HAMED'S LAIR.

ALFRED LOVERING ate supper and then walked outside the Flowing Bowl. When he entered the town on the stage he had seen one house which stood apart from the rest, standing on a ledge like a light-house, and when he emerged from the hotel the first thing he saw was the same building.

He turned to a rough-looking fellow who was lounging on a bench near the door.

"Who lives up there, my friend?"

"Up thar? Wal, as nigh as I kin figger it, he's ther fu'st cousin o' ther Evil One. He calls hisself Hamed, the Magician, an' I reckon he's all o' that."

"Do you know him?"

"Jest a few—he an' me had some confab together. I went in thar last night with a cargo o' whisky aboard, an' he pitched into me like Tom O'Sullivan, an' knocked me out in four rounds."

The speaker, who was none other than Mose Devlin, the pugilist, spoke ruefully, and rubbed some of his many lame places. Between Hamed and Dave Bond he had fared badly, and it hurt his pride all the more because there were reasons why he deeply regretted his indiscretion.

"I take it his magic rests in his fists, then," Lovering carelessly observed.

"Not all on't, for he communes with ther unseen hobgoblins o' ther past an' futur'. He's a fortune-teller, he is."

"A fortune-teller?"

"Yas."

"Is that the way he gets his living?"

"Wal, I don't know o' any other visible means o' support. I reckon he makes that his sole stake."

Lovering asked some more questions about the dweller on Madrock Ledge, and then walked slowly away.

"I am tempted to visit him, as I have nothing else to do this morning. Why not? He may be able to give me some valuable information. People say there is nothing in fortunetelling but a swindle, but I have seen some odd things in my wanderings around the world, and if this fellow really has a gift that way he may be useful. I'll try him!"

By which it will be seen that, practical as Lovering was in many respects, he was not proof against a degree of superstition. He had seen magic and the juggling arts in distant parts of the world, and, not understanding them, he had arrived at the conclusion that they were past comprehension.

He walked toward the ledge and slowly ascended. As usual, one light gleamed from the Magician's window, and it was enough of a guide for even a stranger to find his way.

He was soon at the door, and his knock brought Sing-So forth with that gentleman's usual alacrity. Preliminaries were soon settled, and Lovering was conducted to the private room where Hamed delved deep into the unseen.

The two men stood face to face, and for a moment there was silence. Each recognized in the other a man of more than ordinary strength of mind, and the voice of the Magician was unusually courteous as he observed:

"I am Hamed, the fortune-teller. What can I do for you?"

"Well, anything in your line," was the reply. "I came for information not wholly connected with my own horoscope, if that's what you call it."

"You can state your wishes."

"First, tell me my past and future."

"I will, if possible," was the guarded reply, "but there are times when I can reveal nothing. The position of the stars is not favorable to-night, but a good deal will depend on the hour of your birth and the condition of the planets at that time."

A half-smile crossed Lovering's face. If he had a grain of superstition in his nature and believed in astrology, he was also quick to detect the natural turns of the human mind, and he suspected that the man was a mere pretender, and that he was preparing to account for a signal failure to reveal the past.

Hamed, however, had turned away, and was

busy with the mysterious instrument wherein he read, or pretended to read, what was revealed to him and not to common mortals.

"Your name?" he questioned, in his deepest voice.

"Alfred Lovering."

"State the exact time of your birth."

"1829, June 7, fifteen minutes past six, P. M."

"There is an unusual haze on the past, as I had feared there would be. The condition of the planets was then very much the same as now, making all indistinct, and only the minor details of your life are open to my view."

The Magician then proceeded to make some general statements, such as any one could have done by studying Lovering for a few seconds, but he did not touch on any important event in that gentleman's eventful life. He then repeated that the planets were unfavorable, but added that he might, perhaps, be able to answer the other questions which he wished to ask.

Lovering hesitated. His common sense told him he was in the presence of an impostor, but the somber surroundings were not without their effect and he was impelled to go on and test the so-called fortune-teller.

"I wish to know the whereabouts of a certain man," he answered.

"What is his name?"

"Roger Hillard."

Hamed started, but he had the presence of mind to bide it by pretending to arrange his instrument.

"Roger Hillard," he repeated, slowly. "When and where did you know him?"

"I never knew him; never even met him. Two years ago, or such a matter, he was in R—, Illinois. Soon after, he left the town and there is no record of him after that. Give me information which shall lead to his discovery and you shall be well rewarded."

"The stars do not reveal that his life has any connection with yours."

"What of that?"

"Some connection must be established in order for me to trace him. Shall I look for him as a relative, or—"

"Look for him simply as Roger Hillard," was the curt reply.

"You give me little chance, but I will do my best," was the composed reply. "I see here a young man named Roger Hillard who went to sea two years ago, shipping from New York. He was a bold, frank young fellow, well liked by his messmates and a fair sailor, but was washed overboard during a gale and lost."

"Lost!"

"Drowned!" said Hamed, calmly.

"Can't you tell whether it was the same Hillard as the one to whom I refer?"

"There is no way of telling; but he came from the West when he arrived in New York, and it is probable he is the same one. If I was to venture a prediction on such slender grounds as are at my disposal, I should say you are a detective and hunting him."

"Well, I'm hunting him, at any rate. Don't your mystic art enable you to tell whether I shall succeed?"

"It indicates failure."

"I'll be shot if I don't fear you're right!" ejaculated the visitor.

"If it is a matter in which you are much interested, I advise you to confide fully in me," said the Magician, calmly. "By so doing you will place me where I can search out all the facts of the case; without it, I can do nothing. Remember that whatever transpires here will be secret."

"There won't a great deal occur by my telling it," said Lovering, with the caution of a wise man. "I am here to have my fortune told, not to tell it to you."

"It is clear we can do nothing," said Hamed curtly, yet without raising his voice. "You hamper me with mystery, refuse petty details, and leave me to grope in the dark. You had better go; you need pay nothing for what I have told you, unless you see fit."

"I am able to pay my bills," tartly replied Lovering, as he arose; "and I shall pay you, although you have told nothing. Understand that I do it because I came to gratify my curiosity. So far as your complaint goes, I hope I am not so big a fool as to tell all I know about myself and then pay you. That is the game of some of your craft—to draw their victims on."

Hamed listened unmoved.

"We will not discuss the matter, but I again say you have defeated yourself by refusing me your confidence. What have you told me? I doubt if you gave your real name."

His gaze was fixed on the visitor, and the latter felt that if the spectacles were not there it would be a strong one, but he was equal to the demands of the occasion. Betraying no emotion, he laughed lightly.

"You are right; I did not give my real name. I am the Czar of Russia, in disguise, trying to keep out of the way of dynamite and gunpowder. Here's your money; good-night!"

"One moment," said the Magician, in machine-like tones. "Once more I say you will fail in your undertaking, but do not mistake rebuffs for defeat. When convinced that your own efforts are useless, come to me with

a frank confession and I am quite sure I can help you.

Before the last word was spoken, Hamed had opened the door connecting with the outer room, and at this point he called to Sing-So to escort the visitor out, and himself turned away.

In a moment more the door closed behind him.

Obedient, Sing-So had opened the outside door, and at this palpable hint, Lovering walked out in silence.

He stood once more under the open sky, alone; but he was far from being satisfied. There was something about the interview which perplexed and annoyed him, and he knew not whether to regard Hamed as a fraud or not.

Had he been wholly free from a belief in that class of men he would soon have decided the question, but, as it was, he was left in doubt.

While he was still considering, there was a sound of something moving on the lower part of the ledge, and he drew a revolver and crouched behind a boulder. He had come to the town on a mission which made him uncertain when he was safe, and it would be just as well to use caution.

Doubt turned to surprise, however, as the moving object came nearer, first transformed itself from space into a man, and then revealed the face of Bill Wild, the mail-robber.

CHAPTER XI.

BILL WILD'S OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

LOVERING was surprised, and, at first, inclined to doubt the evidence of his own eyes, but there could be no mistake. Bill Wild it was; there was no mistaking his burly figure and peculiarly shaped head. There had been excitement at Bowlder Bar since the mail-robbery, and the fellow must have known there would be, yet he had lost little time before making his appearance near the heart of the town.

The man in ambush half-arose, for he had reasons for wanting to speak with Wild, but he thought better of it and waited to see what the fellow was going to do.

He soon saw.

Wild went straight to Hamed's door and knocked, and it was opened with unexpected quickness. Still, it was hardly ajar before Bill was inside; he had not waited to ask or answer questions; and as it reclosed Lovering lost all view of the interior.

"He walks in as though at home," muttered the watcher, "and now I think of it, I believe there was something peculiar about his knock. Can it be he was expected? If so—"

He ceased speaking and went carefully over the ground of the case. Wild was not a citizen of the Bar; Shea had never seen him before he took passage on the stage. Then, how did it happen he was there so soon, and a caller on the Magician of Madrock Ledge?

Lovering leaped to a conclusion and decided that there had been some one back of the robbery. If Hamed was ambitious to gain a living as a fortune-teller, could he not learn a good deal about the affairs of the citizens of the town by stealing their letters?

"Aba! my gay fortune-teller, I think I see which way the tide is flowing, and I may yet open my mouth and tell these honest people the true character of the man who squats up here on a rock. Mail-robbery is no trifling offense, and I have him on the hip whenever I see fit to bear down on the screws."

This was a satisfactory decision, but Lovering would have given something for a chance to look inside the cabin. The possibility that there was more in the case than he had learned made him anxious.

He made a circuit of the house and looked for means of observation, but the chance was not vouchsafed him. Hamed had evidently had an eye to privacy when he erected his habitation, and no one saw the interior without his knowledge.

Convinced, at last, that all efforts would be useless, Lovering went half-way down the ledge and waited for Wild to reappear. He had something to say to him, and the fact that he would be a dangerous man to interview did not deter him.

Half an hour passed and he was beginning to grow impatient when the door again opened, and the rough came out with the same celerity he had used on entering. Then he moved down the ledge, growling in a way which showed that he was in ill humor.

He forgot to growl, however, when a human figure arose in his path, and his revolver came out with a jerk.

"Be calm!" said Lovering, coolly, "I am your friend, if you'll let me be so; at least, I'm no enemy."

"Go to thunder! Mebbe you think I don't know ye," growled Bill.

"Who am I?"

"Ther galoot who come on ther stage."

"Correct, and I know you also, but that don't make us enemies. As for the stage episode, that's a gone and dead event. Let us drop it. I am a stranger in Bowlder Bar, and I don't care a picayune for the affair; besides, I make it

a rule to keep to myself. What I want is a talk with you."

"I generally talk with my six."

"Come, Bill, don't be a bear. I know you possess an angelic nature under your rough coat. Why do you insist that I am your enemy? I tell you I am not, and I will prove it if you'll give me a chance. I suppose you think you never saw me until to-day, but I will prove that, too, if you will hold your red hand a bit. If it hadn't been for that you'd be in prison now, or done with life. Do you remember the stone which rattled down the bluff and alarmed you and your partner when you were examining your booty? That was sent by me to warn you, and it enabled you to escape."

Lovering had been very well aware that he was running a good deal of risk when he first accosted Bill; the latter was of that wild Western class that use a revolver without compunction when driven to a corner; but the elder man had seen enough of wild life to get his nerves well toned down, and he took the risk calmly.

More than that, he won.

"I reckon you're givin' me taffy," said Wild, in a milder voice, "fur I hain't ther least idee I ever see'd you afore, but I'll test ye an' see how ther wind blows. One word, though; you know a deal about me, it seems—you know ther stage racket, anyhow—an' I give ye fa'r warnin' not ter play any tricks. I'm a desp'rit man when my toes are trod on; see to it ye keep ter yerself."

"That's all right, and you'll find me on the square. Step this way."

"Not fur Joe!"

"What do you mean?"

"Mebbe you've got a gang waitin'."

"Nonsense! I tell you these Bowlder Bar people are nothing to me. The mail-robbery is their funeral, not mine. Besides, I only ask you to go to the other side of the ledge, out of the track of travel. I am as anxious to escape observation as you can be."

"Lead on."

They went, and only paused when the extremity of the ledge was reached. Below them Mad river dashed its waters against the rock, sending up a sullen roar to their ears. Wild's eyes twinkled. If his companion proved dangerous he could throw him over, and it would be a fall he would not be likely to survive.

"You say you don't remember me?" Lovering abruptly said, when this position was gained.

"So I said."

"Yet we have met before."

"Whar?"

"In a town of Illinois where you were an honest coal-heaver."

The rough started.

"Ef you're goin' ter rake up that old affair—"

"By which I conclude you committed some crime there and fled West, as many other men have done. You are on the wrong track; I know nothing about that, nor do I care. Let me explain. At the time I knew you, you were a coal-heaver, or, at least, you drove a coal-wagon and did a small business. Your wife was a servant for one Abram Selden, a wealthy bachelor. Perhaps I should say she had been, for Selden had departed this life and left his wealth behind him, at the precise time when I saw you.

"As is usual when a man leaves money, there was trouble as soon as the old man was gone. He had had an adopted daughter, a young girl named Bertha, I think, and rival factions desired his money. Apparently, the girl had the best of it, for, when his money was sought for, none could be found, and the theory was that she had made 'way with it. You recollect all these points?"

"Yas, an' I know you now."

"Indeed! Who am I?"

"You came ter me one night ez I was drivin' home in my cart, an' axed fur a ride. I took ye up, an' then I got an ear-ache. Ye said ye was one o' the Seldens; a distant relation who had been disowned by ther others, 'cause ye took ter wild ways; but that you wanted your share o' ther old man's money."

"Correct, William. What more?"

"Furdermore, you 'lowed that I ought ter know something about the matter; you delikitly insinuated that servants contrive ter know ez much about a man's affairs ez he does himself; then, slippin' a shinin' gold-piece inter my hand ter heal my wounded feelin's, you reminded me that my wife was a servant there and, prehaps, knowed a good 'eal about a'fairs."

Mr. Wild had warmed to his subject and no longer evinced hostility.

"Exactly. Abram Selden was dead, nearly all his wealth was missing. Nobody knew where it had gone. I, as one of the heirs, wished to know, but information was not forthcoming. You could tell nothing."

"No, but I give it ez my opinion that the gal, Bertha, an' her lover, Charles Winter, had got away with ther cash-box."

"True, and I wish to speak of this, later. First, let me tell you how I recognized you. When we rode in the stage I was dimly con-

scious that I had seen you somewhere before, but I could not tell where. Our former meeting was after dark, you will remember, and, since then, you have grown a beard. I did not know you until, as we followed your trail, we came upon you and Leach as you sat crouched over the scattered mail in the gulch. Then the truth flashed upon me. You had unconsciously assumed just the position that you took when you drove the coal-wagon, and I knew you in a moment."

"Sharp eyes, you've got, gov'nor."

"I resolved that you should not come to grief, and I watched my chance to warn you. When I walked along the ridge above you, I purposely sent a stone rattling down the descent. The result was good, you took alarm and saved yourselves."

"But you fired arter us, gov'nor."

"Did I hit you? I think not. No, I fired wide of my supposed mark. That was to deceive my companions. That Silver-Plated Sol is a keener, and it would not do to have him know I was playing a double game. Despite all my care he suspected me—but, never mind. Now, Bill, you and I should be allies."

"Right you are, gov'nor."

"What business had you with Hamed?"

Wild hesitated.

"Went ter hev my fortune told," he then muttered.

"Nonsense; you did nothing of the kind. It was Hamed who caused you to rob the stage!"

Lovering made the assertion as confidently, outwardly, as though he was sure of the ground under his feet, and the mail-robber was too much surprised to make an immediate reply.

"I presume Hamed is a generous employer, but if you will attach yourself to my cause I will do better by you. Why did he want the stage robbed?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAGEDY OF MADROCK LEDGE.

BILL WILD had seen too much of the world to readily become a revealer of important secrets, and though he was impressed by the idea that in Lovering he would find an employer who would pay him more than any one else, it would not do to too readily tell all he knew.

Therefore, he coqueted with the question, and it was not until considerable argument had been used that he decided to make a clean breast of it.

"Wal, you're right, gov'nor," he finally admitted. "It was the Magician that hired me to do ther job."

"What was his motive?"

"He wanted us to abstraculate all letters a'dressed ter Joseph Danforth, postmaster o' this hyar town."

"Is it possible? What was his motive?"

"That I don't know. He didn't go inter no details, but simply stated what he wanted an' paid fur ther job."

"And that is the reason, and the sole one, why the mail was robbed?"

"Yas."

"Were there letters?"

"Two. I hev jest delivered them ter him."

"Did you see him read them?"

"No. He put 'em in his pocket, paid what was due me, an' then bowed me out ez perlite ez you please."

"And you have no knowledge of their contents?"

"None at all. He looked at ther postmark —both was from ther East—an' looked disapp'nted, so I reckon he didn't get what he was arter."

Lovering was silent for a few seconds, and then he abruptly continued:

"We will drop that matter. Let us speak of Bertha, the adopted daughter of Abram Selden. She had two lovers in the old days: a Roger Hillard, with whom she seems to have quarreled, and, later, a Charles Winter. Can you tell me anything about either of these men?"

"No, I ain't seen 'em sence they left ther old town."

"Have you reason to believe Winter and Bertha really stole Selden's money, and that they went away together?"

"Now, you hev me; I dunno. Winter was a snaky chap, but my wife always held to it Bertha was ez honist ez ther sun. But nobody knows."

"Where is your wife now?"

"Don't ask me."

Lovering shrugged his shoulders; he believed Bill Wild had shortened the existence of that unfortunate woman by a third of a lifetime.

"Never mind. Let me now tell you what I want. The Selden money matter is not yet settled. The lawful heirs are working up the case and trying to get evidence to prove the girl, Bertha, a thief. Unluckily for them, she has disappeared; they know nothing of her present whereabouts. Now, I, as I said before, ought to have a share of the money. I am an heir, but the high-and-lofty of the family cast me off. I'm working on my own hook, trying to find Winter and Bertha. If I can do that, I shall tell them to divide or I will betray them."

"Right enough, your honor."

"I have received news that Winter is in Montana and near here; just where, I don't know. Of course, he must be living under an assumed name. Now, if you will become my ally I will pay you well. I am looking for Bertha, Winter and Roger Hillard. The two men I have never seen and would not recognize if I saw them, of course. But you know all the parties. Will you join your fortunes with mine?"

"I will, gov'nor, mighty quick."

"Are you acquainted here in Bowlder Bar?"

"Not much."

"Would you know if any of the parties were here?"

"No."

"Well, we must learn. I am working up one town after another, and, just now, I'm at Bowlder Bar. You can help me if you will. Can you disguise yourself so that people will not know you, and then come here and work the town, always watching for those I want to find?"

"I reckon so. By cuttin' off my beard, an' gettin' inter diff'rent clothes, I ought ter fool 'em, seein' ez how nobody hyar knows me except what Shea and ther sport see'd o' me on ther stage."

"Exactly. Well, do this, and you shall be well rewarded."

Lovering then proceeded to speak more definitely as regarded his willingness to pay, and with the discussion of details another half-hour went by.

Then the men separated, and Lovering returned to the town. It was not wise for the two to be seen together, and Bill did not dare venture nearer the village than he then was. His present quarters were with Leach in the mountains.

"The sky brightens," thought Lovering, as he went. "Wild has only to see Hillard, Winter or Bertha to recognize them, and I am sure their discovery will give me light on this affair. So far, I am in luck."

He would hardly have been so positive had he known what was transpiring at Madrock Ledge.

When Lovering left Wild the latter remained on the point of rock in a thoughtfully exultant mood. Knowing the full value of money, he was greatly pleased at the thought of filling his pockets. He intended to be faithful to his new employer, and make himself so valuable that the latter could not afford to drop him, and he meant to have the full value of his services in the money he craved.

It was unlucky for him that he allowed himself to fall into this dream of greed, for, as he stood looking down where the waters of Mad river flung themselves noisily against the ledge, he was unconscious that any one else was near until a terrible grip was fastened on his neck, and a voice hissed in his ear:

"Traitorous dog, your last hour has come! So you would sell me out to Lovering, would you? You have told him all my secrets, have you? Vile wretch, you have sealed your own doom. You are a dead man!"

Wild struggled in vain in that remorseless hold, for he might as well have tried to break Madrock Ledge in two. He could not break away, and he was held so that he could not retaliate.

He had turned enough to discover that his assailant was Hamed, the Magician, but, even then, he was conscious of a change in the man's voice and manner which indicated that he was playing a false part when he appeared as Hamed.

"You have told that I hired you to rob the stage, and sold yourself to my enemy. Foul dog, treachery to me means death, and you shall have your portion!"

Wild tried to speak, but the grasp on his neck stifled all utterance and was fast strangling him. He tried again to break away, but it was in vain.

"I'll show you how I serve traitors. Mad river waits for its victim, and the ragged rocks below the ledge never spare. Down, dog, and meet your fate!"

At the last word the infuriated Magician swung his victim around and, with a great effort, hurled him from the rock.

A faint, horrified cry arose from the space, but it was not repeated. With the dash and roar of the waters no splash could be heard, and, after that one cry, all was still except the usual rough music of the river.

Bill Wild had gone down to the jagged rocks which were said to never spare.

Mose Devlin, the pugilist, had good reasons for regretting his carousal of the previous night. It was nothing new for him to "paint the town red," and when he imbibed too freely and had to undergo a headache in consequence, he bore it with the philosophy of a man hardened in such ways.

Yet, on this occasion, he knew he had made worse than a fool of himself. Had he not been drunk he would never have molested Ettala or Lois; he had good reasons for knowing he ought to let them alone. He had, however, made a big blunder, and he was sorry for it.

His regret did not extend so far as David

Bond. It will be remembered that it was the latter who came to the rescue of the girls, and that he had handled Devlin severely. The rough had many a lame and tender spot to remind him of the fact had it been necessary, but it was not; his pride had received worse injury than his body.

As a self-assured pugilist and "chief," his downfall was a terrible one.

He spent the day brooding over it and meditating revenge, and by nightfall was ready for action.

Shortly after he saw Lovering outside the Flowing Bowl and directed him to Madrock Ledge, he left his position and went to a low saloon which was familiarly known as "Mac's." There he found two men seated at a table, drinking and playing cards. They were roughs of the town and known as Grim Jack and Snaky Dick.

"Hello, sport!" said the former, looking up. "We thort you had furgot ther a'p'intment."

"Wal, I ain't," said Mose, with a profane addition. "I ain't ther man ter furgot when ther business is o' this kind."

"What is ther rifle, anyhow, ef ther question ain't too brash?" Jack inquired.

"It's revenge; that's what it is!" bissed Devlin, as he struck his hand on the table. "See yer', men, you've know'd me fur some time; do ye take me ter be a coward?"

"You're chock-full o' sand," Dick asserted.

"Wal, I got laid out last night. I'd been on a t'ar, an' I tackled a man in that condition an' got licked. Ther man was Giant Dave. You know him?"

His friends admitted that they did.

"He flung me on ther hardside o' ther ground and bruised me up a good 'eal an' now I'm goin' fur revenge an' I want yer help. Not that I can't lay him out; I kin do that; but I want witnesses. See?"

They said they did, and they really saw further than Mose wished. It was clear to them that while he was resolved to try and whip Giant Dave, he had doubts of his ability to do so, and wanted them at hand to help, in case he could not ride the horse he saddled.

Further talk followed, and he had admitted as much in an indirect way before he was through. It was clear he had a proper respect for Dave Bond's muscle.

"We'll hev one more drink," he announced, "an' then we'll go on ther war-path. Ef that is any shape left ter ther critter when I'm through with him, then I'm a liar!"

CHAPTER XIII.

GIANT DAVE AT BAY.

At the further side of the village of Bowlder Bar stood a small cabin in which lived David Bond, whom his neighbors called Giant Dave. There was nothing about the place to distinguish it from others of its class, but those who had been inside were always struck by the singular neatness everywhere visible.

As a rule, when housekeeping is solely done by men, it is not so well done.

Dave Bond lived alone. He was daily employed in the Eighteen-Carat Mine, where he was an industrious and valued laborer. Outside of work, he was, however, considered decidedly "slow."

He was not a social man, and rarely made a visit or invited any one to call on him; he never played cards or drank; he seldom carried weapons; and by many was considered a slow-witted fellow who was too dull to know the value of the immense strength which rested in his arms and body.

There were those, however, who read him better, and the owner of the Eighteen-Carat Mine, who had come to regard him highly, suspected that there had been a time when Giant Dave was anything but the moderate-tempered miner of that day. That he had been guilty of a serious crime Mr. Alvord did not believe, but he did think that there was something in his past which he regretted, and that he was trying to live a life that would make amends.

At times, when bantered too severely by his companions, and accused of having dull wits, a quick light would leap into his eyes which spoke as plain as words of a fiery nature under his moderate exterior; but with a great effort he would subdue his passion and bear all quietly.

Something of this nature made itself visible on the evening when he defended Ettala and Lois from Mose Devlin.

On this evening, and at the hour the pugilist was collecting his allies, Giant Dave sat alone in his cabin, bending over a book. It was nothing new for him, for in a locked chest he kept several of them, and every evening saw him devoting a portion of his time to them.

Yet, they were almost the simplest of educational books, and indicated that, at twenty-three years of age, David Bond was just beginning his education.

Certainly, he had not advanced sufficiently to use correct language.

He was busy with the book when the door unceremoniously opened and three men entered. A troubled look crossed Dave's face. The foremost of the visitors was Mose Devlin, and he needed no explanation to convince him

the visit was a hostile one in the fullest sense of the word. He scented trouble and would gladly have avoided it.

"Hyar ye be; jest the galoot we was a-lookin' fur," said Devlin, in a bullying tone.

"Yas, I'm here," Dave slowly answered.

"It'll save us the trouble o' huntin' furder. Gents, sit down an' make yerselves at home while I transact my biz with this small mountin' o' a man."

Bond had laid his book aside, and he silently watched while the two minor ruffians sat down. Mose put his arms akimbo and faced the man he intended to whip, with an insolent swagger.

"You an' me don't need no introduction, Mister Dave Bond," the pugilist continued. "We've met afore an' said our little say, an' all that needs ter be done now is ter state ther condition o' affairs ez they now is."

"I don't see ez we need ter talk at all," pacifically observed Giant Dave.

"That's whar we don't agree. Mebbe you've forgot that you flung me 'round like a football when I had been paintin' ther town red, an' was in no condition ter stand up ag'in' you."

"You compelled me ter do it," urged the giant.

"Durn yer impudence, ye know better. What call bad you ter chip in? It wa'n't none o' yer funeral. You took me when ther wine was in an' ther wits an' strength out—it was a mean an' cowardly thing ter do."

"You know why I did it," said Dave, moderately, though a deeper color was creeping into his cheeks; a sign that the abusive manner of his visitor was having effect. "I couldn't stand idle an' see women-folks abused. You ought not ter feel hard about it."

"Wal, I do, an' I'm goin' ter give ye a lesson fer yer brashness that'll l'arn ye ter keep ter yerself herearter. I'm goin' ter make ye weep; I'm goin' ter pound ye all ter pieces. I'm Mose Devlin, ther sledge-hammer pugilist, ther man that knocked out Tom O'Sullivan in four rounds. I reckon it'll take jest one round ter polish ye off, but I'll lick ye wuss than any man was ever licked afore."

"I hope ye'll think twice afore ye do anything rash," Dave earnestly said. "I'm not a fightin' man, an' I don't want no trouble. Better let it drop, an' forgit that there was trouble."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the pugilist, "I allays knowed ye was a chicken-hearted critter. Ye was bold enough when I was too drunk ter fight, but ye ain't nowhar now, ye mean, sneakin' coward!"

The blood rushed to Giant Dave's face in a deep, red flood, his eyes flashed and his lips were compressed tightly, but he clinched his broad hands and kept silent.

"Do ye hear?" asked Devlin, exulting over the effect he had produced.

"I hear, but I wish I didn't," said Dave, huskily. "I hope you'll let this drop right whar ye be, an' go away. You kin call me a coward, or anything else you choose, but I don't want no trouble."

"You'll git yer stomach full on't afore I'm through with you. I've come fur satisfaction, an' I'm a bad man with a hole in my boot. Dave Chicken, you've got ter fight, an' I'll lam ther life out o' ye. Grim Jack, shut ther door!"

The man addressed started to obey, but as he did so another man crossed the threshold and stood before them, cool, calm and careless as though nothing unusual was likely to occur.

"I'll be doorkeeper," he serenely announced.

Devlin stared at him for a moment in silence and then uttered a profane exclamation.

"You'll keep ther outside on't!" he declared. "This is a private matinee, an' no strangers ain't allowed. Git out!"

"I'm not 'gittin' this week," was the cool reply. "As for being a stranger, I've left my card in the contribution-box, but I don't mind saying I'm Silver-Plated Sol, at your service. I can't think of goin' away, my friend; you have two heelers here and Mr. Bond has none; consequently I'll chip in on my own hook and see fair play. Don't expect me to go, for you can't have the earth this week."

Devlin had tried to interrupt this speech, but the words flowed on as peacefully, yet steadily, as the march of the sun. The pugilist recognized in Silver-Plated Sol a man of superior strength of mind and nerve, and he began to feel somewhat cowed.

"You'd better keep ter yerself!" he growled.

"I see you're a hog, Moses. A man of your disposition ought to have a little world of his own, and then he could regulate the sun, moon and stars to suit himself. On this globe he can't do it; not for Joe! Happening along here I heard you, with two big ruffians at your back, trying to bulldoze a single man. Now, the rule 'Keep to yourself!' is a good one in most cases, but it won't work here. Not any! If there is going to be a prize fight, I am going to be around and see the fun."

Thus far Devlin had listened with a sort of helpless feeling, for Silver-Plated Sol was a man who made an impression when he talked, but as he realized that his reputation as a "chief" was at stake, he resolved to try a bluff game.

"Durn yer mule-head!" he stormed, "get out o' this, or I'll throw you out!"

"Unfortunately for you, Moses, you ain't big enough," said Sol, with provoking coolness.

The pugilist was stung to the quick, and he made two long strides forward. There he paused, however. Colton had quietly drawn one of his silver-plated revolvers, and though the muzzle was not raised, Devlin took the hint and stopped where he was.

"I should dislike to get near enough to such a brute as you are to fight," said the rover, calmly, "but if there is enough left of you to do battle when Mr. Bond is through with you, I suppose I can accommodate you. It's two to one, however, that Bond chews your ear off before you can say J. Robinson."

Devlin changed his mind. He read the determination of the intruder and thought it would be just as well not to saddle a second horse until he had tamed the one already caught, and he wheeled about.

"Giant Dave, be you ready?" he demanded. Bond hesitated.

"No," he then answered.

"How much time do you want?"

"What I want is peace," said the miner, earnestly. "I am not a fightin' man, an' I don't want ter meet ye. Thar was a time when I'd have done it, but not now."

"You're a coward an' a sneak!" sneered the pugilist.

Again the blood rushed to Dave's face, and Silver-Plated Sol saw him clinch his hands tightly. Plainly, it was only by a great effort that he kept quiet.

"Be you goin' ter fight, or will ye stand thar an' be hammered all ter pieces?" Devlin added.

"I shall defend myself if you attack," was the husky answer; "but I hope you'll keep away. You're no match fur me, an' I don't want ther disgrace o' a fight."

"I'll show ye whether I'm a match fur you!" shouted Devlin, and as he spoke he dashed forward.

Had he taken time for thought he would not have been so precipitate. From the first he had doubted his ability to whip the big miner, but he had relied on Grim Jack and Snaky Dick to join in. Now, there was little hope of their aid, for they had looked cowed and troubled ever since Sol Colton arrived, but the pugilist was so excited that he forgot all prudence and went into the fight with a rush.

Giant Dave stood firm. He saw that there was no way to avoid the fight without accepting the brand of coward, and that he was not prepared to do.

He must meet the rough, but he was resolved to worst him without any serious results.

Consequently, as Devlin rushed forward, his arms outstretched, Dave met him firmly, and the two came together with a resounding shock.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEVLIN'S COLD DAY.

SILVER-PLATED SOL had been somewhat doubtful about the man he had championed. That Bond had the muscle to win the fight he did not doubt, but his peculiar conduct and evident desire to avoid it left some doubt whether he had the nerve.

The matter was soon settled.

Giant Dave met his enemy firmly, and in a moment more they were mixed up in a desperate struggle. Devlin was large and strong, with shoulders and arms of extraordinary size, and his friends had some hope that he might prove agile enough to worst the giant.

They were speedily undeceived.

The struggle could hardly be said to have reached its heat when Dave was seen to lift his opponent bodily, and then, with a quick motion, he laid him flat on his back and planted one foot on his breast.

Dave Bond was no longer the quiet, stoical man they had known. He towered above Devlin like a colossal statue, except that his eyes flashed and his nostrils dilated with the excitement of the moment. He was thoroughly aroused, and he seemed like a lion in his wrath.

Sol Colton was so delighted that he was about to express his enthusiasm by clapping his hands, but Mose Devlin squirmed under the heavy foot and panted:

"Let me up; let me up, or I'll kill you! It was a foul hold; you took a mean advantage!"

"I b'lieve 'twas ketch-as-ketch-can," said Bond, in a clear, ringing voice. "Fool! I told you, you was no match fur me; why, I could lick you with one hand tied behind me. You are a child compared to me, an' you may be thankful I don't crush ye like ther serpent you be. You see your game of bullyism don't work hyar."

"Bravo!" cried Sol. "It was the prettiest fall of the season. What! he wants more? Let him up, Dave, and give him one more for luck. He won't know enough to keep to himself until he's whipped hard, and I advise you to lay the coat on thick."

Bond removed his foot and the pugilist scrambled up, but he had already seen his inability to fight the strong miner, and he drew a knife with a jerk.

"I'll cut you ter pieces!" he hissed.

He leaped forward, but a scornful smile arose to the giant's face and, without perceptible effort, he seized the would-be assassin's wrist, and in a moment more the knife was wrenched away and flung aside with such force that, going point first, it struck the wall and the keen steel went deep into the wood, quivering as though with life.

"Score another!" cried Silver-Plated Sol.

There was time to say no more. The pugilist remembered his old art and sent out his right fist viciously, but it missed its mark, and in a moment more Boud was again upon him.

Like a child the rough was raised from the floor, and then the frail cabin trembled as he was dashed down again. He fell helplessly, flat on his back, and there he lay without sign of life.

Consciousness had been dashed from him.

For a moment there was silence in the room, but as Giant Dave saw his enemy helpless the battle-fire faded from his eyes and the old, troubled look appeared on his face.

"I had to do it!" he muttered.

"Ay, and you did it well!" Colton enthusiastically declared. "It was as pretty a piece of work as I ever saw. David Bond, I never saw you before this occasion, but you're a man I'm proud to know, and I hope we may not wind up our acquaintance here."

"I hope he ain't bad hurt," continued the victor, not seeming to hear the last speech.

"Bless and save us, the world is better for it if he is. Don't think you climbed him too hard. Such a man can't be over-licked. I glory in your work. I say, you, what're you going to do about it?"

The last question was addressed to Grim Jack and Snyk Dick, who were looking stupidly at their fallen leader, and Dick was moved by the sharpness of the inquiry to make prompt answer.

"I reckon nothin'," he said. "We didn't come hyar ter fight, an' we ain't got no quarrel."

"All right! I thought perhaps you wanted to try somebody a hack, in which case I wouldn't be mean enough to refuse you; but as you're on the peace commission, I'll keep to myself. Your man is beginning to stir; better get him out into the air."

Devlin sat erect, but he was dull and dazed, and as he showed no inclination to talk, his comrades raised and led him from the room. It was clear there would be no further trouble from him that night.

"Allow me to observe that you are a clipper," said Colton, addressing the victor. "I am a few in a fight, but I lack your muscle. It was a splendid piece of work!"

"I am sorry it happened, fur I had hoped never ter be in a fight ag'in," Dave soberly said.

"You're a queer chick!" Sol tersely observed.

"You don't understand; but, ez I cotton ter you, I'll give ye an insight inter what nobody else in this town knows. Set down, an' I'll tell ye why I am opposed ter fightin'."

He spoke with a seriousness which prevented any light reply from Sol, and the two sat down at the table.

"It is generally said that two-thirds o' ther men in ther West bear names not their own," said Bond, "an' I am one o' them. My real name is Dave Buzzard. Two years ago I was livin' in Colorado, an' I had a sister an' three brothers. Ther last were what is commonly called hard customers, an' they didn't hold human life ez valuable ez it should be held. I was fast follerin' in their steps, an' should probably hev been ez bad ez any on 'em, only I was ther youngest o' ther four."

"Ther Buzzard brothers had a bad name, an' with good reason, an' our sister—her name was Mona—had labored with us in vain ter effect a reformation. Finally she married a man called Colorado Rube, an', ez my brothers was down on him, war folleried. I don't keer ter say jest what folleried, but that was lawless scenes, in which I had a part ez wal ez my brothers; but I will tell ye how it eended."

"One day I found myself ther only survivor o' ther four giant brothers. Bill, Jack and Tom were dead, an' all had died by violence, brought on by their vicious ways. Then my eyes was opened. I saw that ther course my sister had advised me ter tread was ther proper one, an' I resolved ter do diff'rent. I left Colorado, changed my name, an' come hyar. Ther was no human blood on my hands, an' I thought I wasn't past reformation. Nobody hyar knowned me, though some o' them might possibly have heerd o' ther Buzzard brothers, o' Hotspur City, an' I resolved ter keep ter myself, avoid all quarrels, an' live a decent life. That is why I hated ter be driven inter a fight with Mose Devlin."

This story was simply told, and as Colton was sensible enough to look at it in its true light—the desire of an honest man to shake off the reputation and fate of those who had led him into dubious ways—he reached out his hand and freely expressed his sympathy.

"Thar are times when I find it hard ter hold in," Dave resumed, "but I know my sister is thinkin' o' me, an' wishin' me wal, an' I keep

my temper down ez much ez I can. Them who irritate me don't know, really, what these arms can do when I'm fairly stirred up."

He put out his broad hands and massive arms with conscious, but subdued pride, and Sol could well believe them capable of great execution.

"What you want is a good wife to keep you on your present track," he said.

Dave started. During the last twenty-four hours he had thought a good deal about Ettala Danforth, despite the fact that he deemed her far above him, and the remark recalled his day-dream vividly.

He made no reply, however, and the subject was dropped as Sol began asking questions which he hoped would give him a clew to the identity of the man and woman he had trailed all the way from Red Summit to Bowlder Bar.

Dave, however, had but a limited acquaintance in the town, and nothing came of it.

Colton soon left and returned to the Flowing Bowl Hotel. He kept a close watch for Devlin and his allies as he went, but they did not make themselves visible. Evidently, the pugilist had got enough of war for the present.

"I see no way to proceed now except to call on the postmaster and get his aid," thought the rover, when once more in his room. "He is said to be an honorable man, and he ought to be willing to oblige me to the extent of telling me who inquires for a letter addressed to 'A. B. C.' I will write a decoy and set it afloat, and whoever takes it in will, beyond doubt, be the man who killed Roger Hillard. I must somehow contrive to get light on the affair, which is, at present, all mystery."

Had the rover known how many other people in Bowlder Bar were interested in Hillard, he would have had more reason than ever to say the affair was mysterious.

He drew from his pocket the letter he found in the gulch, after Wild and Leach deserted the scattered mail, and, after a long study of the chirography, wrote one which a casual observer might well say was from the same hand.

It was that intended as a decoy for "A. B. C.", and on the following day he intended to seek Joseph Danforth with it in his pocket.

The next morning there was a slight sensation at the village. Lovering heard that the river had thrown up the body of a man near Mad-rock Ledge, but he paid little attention to the rumor until he heard it stated that Tim Shea had recognized it as that of one of the mail-robbers.

Then he went to view it in haste, only to have his worst suspicions verified.

It was all that was mortal of Bill Wild, and the jagged rocks of the ledge had not left him in any too good condition. Still, he was easily recognizable, and Lovering knew he had lost his ally almost in the hour he had gained him.

There was nothing to tell of Hamed's share in the work, and every one except Lovering seemed glad that retribution had so soon overtaken the mail-robber.

Lovering, however, saw himself cast again on his own resources, and the way to accomplish his object did not seem clear.

CHAPTER XV.

THE POSTMASTER'S OMINOUS VISITOR.

JOSEPH DANFORTH was seated in the post-office and going over a column of figures with clerk-like precision when a man walked in at a saunter. Joseph looked up and saw a stranger, but as his face was a prepossessing one, he arose politely.

"Good-morning, sir," said the caller. "I am here on a trifle of business, to-day, so I will first introduce myself. My name is Colton."

Joseph observed that he was pleased to see Mr. Colton, and would attend to any business he had to transact. He thought it probable he was about to settle at Bowlder Bar, and he might be a man worth having as a friend.

"I am about to ask a peculiar favor of you," continued the visitor, "but when I say it is one dictated by a good motive, I think you will not refuse."

"I am sure of it," said Danforth, with a smile. "Come right to business, and I'll tell you my decision."

"Well, I want to place a letter in the post-office and have you keep watch and see who calls for it."

"I don't exactly understand."

"You will when I explain. The point is right here: There is a certain person I want to identify. I expect him to call here for a letter somewhat peculiarly addressed—in fact, directed simply to A. B. C."

Danforth started so abruptly that he knocked a pile of letters to the floor. It was a most fortunate thing for him, for he at once stooped to pick them up and, being behind the counter hid his face from his visitor.

He trembled as he did so, and his face bore a frightened look, but he realized the importance of hiding all this and made a desperate effort to recover his composure.

He succeeded far better than he dared hope, and, as he came up, began tying the letters together with twine.

"Addressed to A. B. C., did you say?" he asked, with a good assumption of carelessness.

"Yes."

"That's a queer address."

"Rather, but the writer is in queer business."

"What part is it you wish me to play?"

"Simply to let me know who inquires here for a letter thus addressed."

"I am not sure but that would be a breach of official etiquette."

"What harm could it do?"

"That I don't know, as I don't know you or A. B. C., but I take it a postmaster should hardly divulge the secrets of his office."

"How if he was thereby favoring the claims of justice?"

"That would make a difference, of course. Is this A. B. C. a criminal?"

"Well, yes."

"And you an officer?"

"No, but I am working to that end."

Danforth had finished tying up the letters, and he now faced Silver-Plated Sol with a half-defiant expression on his face.

"Tell me plainly what the man has done and I will help you. Of course I don't want to get into trouble—I depend on the post-office to support me and my sister, in a measure—and I must go slow; but I am always ready to act in behalf of justice."

Danforth spoke with a frankness which seemed to indicate that he was speaking just what he thought, but Sol still retained his dislike to making his affairs public.

"I wish you would take my word that it is all right, and be content to learn particulars later," he said.

The postmaster hesitated.

"Well, I'll think of it, and will talk with you two hours later. Just now I must get the mail in shape, for Shea will soon be around for it. Come to me at eleven o'clock and my sister will be on duty in the office, and in a private room up-stairs we can talk it over. How does that strike you?"

He spoke with a frankness which was encouraging, and he always had a plausible air, and the rover expressed his satisfaction with the programme.

"By the way, what did you say was your name?" Joseph asked, carelessly.

"Colton—Sol Colton."

"Why, you must be the Silver-Plated Sol who figured in the stage-robbery affair."

"So I am."

"Well, I shall be pleased to see you at eleven, sharp."

And then Sol went his way and Joseph was left alone. He wiped his forehead with a nervous gesture.

"He's on the track!" he muttered. "Great heavens! what shall I do? Shall I flee, or remain and brave it out? But Burbank must settle it; Burbank is the man."

It was to call in the aid and advice of the gambler that he had got rid of Sol for a time. He now tried to think how he could get word to his ally, but, as luck would have it, Luke sauntered in serenely smoking a cigar.

"Who do you think has been here?" Danforth quickly asked.

"The postmaster-general, possibly."

"Silver-Plated Sol."

"Ah!"

Burbank showed more interest; his languid air vanished.

Joseph hurriedly related what had taken place, and then a quiet smile passed over the gambler's face.

"You showed rare presence of mind," he approvingly said, "and as you have arranged matters, we will wind up Sol's bobbin in short order. I have been unable to get at him sooner, principally because my men were not at hand, but we will take the cake this time, sure."

"How?"

"Easy enough. When you get the fellow up-stairs you must drug him, and then I'll produce men to carry him outside the village and forever dispose of him; possibly we'll sink him in Mad river. That convenient little stream gave up one victim to-day, but I'll see that this one don't rise."

"We can't get him out of the village in broad daylight."

"We won't try. When you have drugged him, you can stow him away in a closet, or some safe place, and there let him remain until night. After dark I'll drop around with two stout fellows and take him away."

Joseph meditated for a moment, and then answered:

"That plan looks well; all but the calling in of your men. I don't like the idea of too many confederates."

"Perhaps you're right. Well, there's Mose Devlin; he's a good friend of yours; and three of us ought to be able to dispose of the sport."

"That is better; but what about the drug?"

"Oh! I'll furnish that."

Further conversation was prevented by the arrival of Ettala, and then Shea drove up with his stage. Brother and sister hurriedly completed their work on the mail, and when it was done the stage rolled away and Joseph and Burbank went out together.

Ettala, left alone, looked after them thoughtfully.

"I don't like to see Joseph so much with that gambler. I fear he is falling into bad habits, and I must have a serious talk with him. No good can come of their association. I wonder what they meant by speaking about a drug? I would have asked them bluntly, but I don't want to make any unnecessary talk when Burbank is around. He looks at me in a way which makes me shiver."

And the girl did shiver, in reality. She hated and feared Luke Burbank; not only did the man have a bad reputation, but her instincts were enough to tell her that he was of a thoroughly evil nature, and though she did not yet suspect that he had marked her for his future wife, she detected the fact that he was looking at her with more than ordinary meaning.

As she entered the office she had heard Danforth's last question and Burbank's answer, but as no more of their conversation had reached her ears she did not attach any great importance to it.

She usually remained in the office for two or three hours during the forenoon, and on this occasion she prepared to go through with the usual routine.

Two things happened this forenoon which were worthy of mention. She saw Joseph and Silver-Plated Sol pass the door, and she thought they entered the house, but as this was nothing unusual, she gave the matter but passing notice.

Shortly after, Lois Orme called upon her. As we have already seen, the girls were fast friends, and were together a good deal of the time. They had not, however, met since their visit to the Magician of Madrock Ledge, and the subsequent adventure of Mose Devlin, and there was enough about which to talk.

Lois, however, did not tell all that Hamed had said to her. That important epoch in her life, upon which Hamed had spoken so fully, was one she had never mentioned to Ettala, and she had no intention of speaking now.

She was puzzled and troubled by it. She knew not what view to take of it. She had never believed in the so-called art of fortune-telling, but from the way in which the Magician had spoken she knew he must either have a gift in that direction, or, in an ordinary way, be possessed of many facts in regard to her past life.

Naturally practical, she was inclined to take the latter view of the case, and it was one which troubled her. She had hoped to leave the old life forever behind when she came to this remote Montana town, but if one person knew of it, all were liable to know.

The ghost of Bertha Wardner would not be eclipsed by the Lois Orme of the present day.

Consequently, while Ettala talked freely of the visit to the Magician, there was less fact than fancy in what Lois said, though her friend did not suspect any evasion.

The girls remained in the office until one o'clock. From that time the four, by general consent, it was closed; and Ettala went upstairs to prepare dinner.

At her earnest invitation Lois accompanied her, though not without some dissent. Her manner was not different from on previous occasions, and Ettala was more than ever led to believe she did not care to meet Joseph; but she yielded at last and they ascended to the upper part of the house together, little suspecting the experience which awaited them.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MAN UNDER THE FLOOR.

JOSEPH DANFORTH was alone when they reached the family sitting-room. Whatever had been the result of Silver-Plated Sol's visit he was not then visible, and the girls did not suspect he had been there.

The postmaster, however, did not seem so much at his ease as usual. He greeted Lois in a different way, too, and on the whole seemed sorry to see her. He had an abrupt, nervous manner which attracted Ettala's attention, though she did not mention it.

Lois was not at all disappointed, if her calm exterior was a criterion, and she treated Joseph with the placid politeness she always showed when she met him in Ettala's presence.

There were those who might have suspected this was only a mask, but Miss Danforth was not one of them.

Assisted by Lois she began preparations for dinner, while Joseph kept his position by a certain door which he had practically barricaded with his chair. The door was the means of communication with an unfinished room at one corner of the house, and while he tried to talk naturally he was always listening for sounds from this room.

Now and then sounds floated up from the street in such a way that their origin was uncertain, and in such cases he would start and turn partially toward the unfinished room.

The climax of his troubles was reached when Ettala came to his side, laid her hand on the door-knob and asked him to move. He had been expecting something of the kind, and he obeyed in silence, but the door resisted her efforts.

"It is locked," she said.

"Well, unlock it, then," Joseph replied with an assumption of laziness.

"The key is not here."

"More carelessness on your part," he said, pretending to reprove her. "What have you done with it?"

"I haven't had it. It was in the lock when I saw it last; I think you have it."

"I?"

"Yes."

"What could I want of it?"

"To have taken it to bother me."

"Wrong, my dear sister; wrong. The key has probably dropped out and become mislaid. I assure you I haven't it," he added, hastily, as she looked at him in a mischievously earnest way, as though contemplating an attack to settle that point.

The fact that the key was even then in his pocket made him desire to avoid being searched.

As it was not an important point, as far as she was concerned, Ettala let the matter rest for then and attended to her household duties, but Joseph kept his place by the door and still listened secretly for sounds from the closed room.

No more was said about it, but small matters often assume importance in one's mind, and Ettala's thoughts dwelt on the matter pertinaciously. The fact that the room was locked, made her doubly anxious to enter.

Dinner passed pleasantly, and then occurred something which pleased the girls and troubled Joseph. He received a note by a messenger from one of the foremost men of the town, asking him to call at once.

It was an unpleasant summons. He had resolved not to leave Ettala in the house during the day, but the man who wished to see him was one whose support he earnestly desired in an official way, and he knew he was one who took offense easily.

If he declined to go, trouble might result.

He meditated for a moment, but there seemed no good reason why he should refuse, so he took his hat and went out quickly.

"I'm glad of that," said Ettala.

Lois smiled, but did not answer.

"I mean to get into the store-room," Ettala answered. "I feel sure Joseph has hidden the key, just to plague me, and I will surprise him by having the door wide open when he returns."

"But can you find the key?"

"Bother the key! I have picked a lock before now, and I believe I can do so again."

So saying, she proceeded to find a piece of wire and bend it in what she thought a proper manner. Lois watched with an amused smile, for she had little faith in her ability, but Ettala was as full of tricks as a kitten, which she very much resembled.

She attacked the lock at once, but it did not yield so readily. Lois gave the doubtful assistance of assuring her she would fail, but this only served to make her redouble her efforts, and the bolt finally shot back with a sullen thud.

"There!" she ejaculated. "What do you think of my ability now? Don't you think I was created for a burglar?"

"I think you have had a good deal of trouble for nothing."

"Not for nothing, for I have defeated Joseph, and here is what I wanted—What was that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought I heard something stirring. Yes; there's the same sound again. Why, it sounds as though something was under the floor!"

The room, as has been said, was an unfinished one, but a floor was laid and the boards nailed down. It was used as a store-room, and numerous cases, and odds and ends, were scattered about.

"I think it must be a cat," said Lois.

"A cat! Nonsense! it sounds more like a grizzly bear."

Just as she made this observation there was a renewed stir under the floor—it was difficult to tell just where—and a startled look crossed Ettala's face.

She hurriedly drew Lois out of the room.

"There's a burglar in there!" she exclaimed.

"A burglar!"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"It's all clear enough, and it explains the absence of the key. Some one secretly entered, locked the door on the inside, and concealed himself."

"But why should he get under the floor?"

"He probably did that when he heard me working on the lock."

The girl did not stop to think that it would be difficult for a burglar to take up a nailed-down floor and gain quarters, but hurriedly added:

"I will go for Joseph while you stay here and watch."

"Not I! If you have a burglar here, you may watch him, not I."

"Then you may go for—"

Just then a footprint sounded on the floor. She turned around hoping to see Joseph, but it was Burbank, instead. For a moment he looked

troubled at seeing them, with no sign of Danforth, but his look of easy confidence was fast returning when Ettala began pouring out the story of her discovery.

At the assertion that there was a man under the floor Burbank's self-possession was seriously shaken, for he knew well enough who the man was. The situation was a startling one, and he saw the necessity of doing elaborate work with little time to plan it.

In vain he suggested that it was a cat or dog. Ettala rejected these theories at once; and he soon saw that he must adopt her idea and do his best to avert the threatened danger.

How Silver-Plated Sol could be in condition to stir about in his narrow prison he did not understand, for he had given Joseph a drug which he thought would keep him quiet until night, but that it could be anything else that had produced the sounds he did not think possible.

How could he prevent discovery?

He caught at the only way which seemed open.

"Your idea of going for Joseph is a good one," he said, coolly, "but as we are not sure our theory is correct, it would be just as well to do so quickly. Say nothing to others, but bring him here without a disturbance, and, my word for it, he and I will subdue all the burg'ars you have aboard. I'll remain here on guard."

He drew his revolver as he spoke, and looked so warlike that Ettala felt that all was properly arranged.

Accompanied by Lois, she hurried away to seek her brother, and found him just as he was emerging from the house to which he had been called.

Her story at first produced the utmost consternation, and even after he heard that Burbank was on guard, Joseph looked white and frightened.

Just then he felt utterly helpless and unnerved. Discoveries seemed inevitable which would ruin him, and he lacked the resolution to stand up and fight his way out of trouble. As usual, however, he turned to Burbank for means of relief, and with a faint hope that his ally had rid himself of the girls' presence to play some bold game for relief, he accompanied them back to the house.

They found the gambler on guard, as he had been left, and looking the personification of cool resolution.

"No new developments; I haven't heard a sound," he said, "but we will soon unearth the fellow. Joseph, have you your revolver ready?"

As he spoke he had moved near the postmaster, and, seeing the expression of his face, managed to add in a low tone:

"All's well!"

Danforth breathed freely again; he understood that carefully conveyed information. In some way Burbank had averted the danger.

Then they proceeded to look for the "burglar." The floor was removed in several places and a search made, but nothing in the shape of man, cat or dog could be found. Whatever had been moving under the floor was no longer to be heard, and there was certainly no living intruder there.

So it ended, for the time being, and the matter settled down to theories. Danforth and Burbank clung to their theory that it had been only a cat, but Ettala was equally firm in her assertion that a man had been there, and that he had in some way escaped.

Burbank watched his chance and whispered to Joseph, while he pushed back his cuff to hide a small, red spot:

"Silver-Plated Sol will trouble us no more!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A DARK DEED DONE AT MIDNIGHT.

SAM LEACH, the partner of the late Bill Wild, in the stage robbery, was not in a position to readily get the news of the town, and he did not learn of his pard's death during the day that the body was found.

Both men had been idle, lawless vagabonds drifting over the West, and when they accepted the offer of Hamed, the Magician, to rob the stage, they were well aware that it would make them outcasts from Bowlder Bar.

Consequently, when the deed was done they retired to the mountains, and prepared to live in a cave during the remainder of the time they stayed in the vicinity.

We have already seen how Bill went to report to Hamed; fell in with Lovering and betrayed important secrets; and how he was speedily brought to grief and death by being hurled off Madrock Ledge by Hamed.

Unconscious of the tragedy which had deprived him of a partner, Leach waited all day for him to return, but he came not; and, by evening, dim forebodings had taken the shape of well-defined belief—he felt sure harm had come to his partner.

Such being the case, he resolved to lose no time, but to learn during the night what had occurred, and he knew of no better way than to call on Hamed.

He left his lair in the mountains at what he deemed a safe hour, and started for the village. He went well armed, for he was aware that the people would not deal tenderly with him if he

was captured. Nor was this all. Naturally suspicious, he had formed the idea that, to avoid paying Bill what he had agreed, the Magician had killed him.

As we already know, he guessed somewhere near the truth; he had the fact, though not the motive.

This being the case, he went prepared for trouble in general.

The hour was approaching midnight when he neared the village, but a light still shone from the house on Madrock Ledge, and he made his way there at once.

The door was opened by Sing-So in a cautious way, and as he had never seen Leach, he looked at him suspiciously.

"How-de-do, John? Is ther boss in?" Leach asked.

"Wantee flortune tlold?" Sing-So asked.

"Want thunder! D'y'e take me fur a milk-sop? What I want is ter see ther boss medicine-man, prophet, tom-tcm howler o' this wig-wam. I mean Hamed. Trot him out!"

Mr. Leach was feeling in a belligerent mood, and he made no effort to hide the fact.

"Gotee blisnes?"

"O' course I've got business, you pig-tailed coyote! S'pose I come hyar ter talk over presidential prospects, or ther price o' granulated sugar? But my business ain't yours; trot out the pow-wow chief!"

"Wantee flortune tlold?" persisted Sing-So.

"Now, see hyar, you animated banana-peel, don't ye parley wo no more; I won't b'ar it. I've come ter see Hamed, an' I ain't gwine ter stand hyar an' court a Chinese servant o' ther male gender on ther door-steps. Not any! Waltz out ther futurity lookin'-glass, afore I mash yer head. I'm a desp'rit charakter when I git steam up, an' ef I howl once that'll hev ter be room made fur one more pig-tailed cherub."

Sing-So had been anxiously trying to get a word in, himself, but it was not a possible thing until Sam became ready to yield the floor.

"Hamed not here," he then said.

"Not hyar?"

"No."

"Heathen, ef ye lie ter me—"

"No lie-ee; tellee solum truth, all samee. Hamed glo down to townee for goodsee."

Sing-So carried the air of truth along with him, and Sam accepted what he said as a fact, though it was rather late for even a Magician to go shopping.

"Wal, ef sech is ther case I'll wait fur him. I won't come in, thank ye, fur I don't know what goblins an' giraffes ye hev got in thar ter eat a feller up. I'll wait outside."

It was just as well that he so decided, for Sing-So would certainly not have admitted him.

He walked down the ledge and stood at the point where, several yards below, Mad river dashed its waters against the rock. The place had a fascination for every one, and it is doubtful if any one had ever been in Bowlder Bar without looking off Madrock Ledge into the yeasty pool of water.

He was unconscious of the fact, however, that he stood on the very spot where Bill Wild had met his fate the previous night.

Perhaps ten minutes had passed when a sound from the foot of the ledge arrested Sam's attention. He looked in that direction, thinking Hamed might be returning, but what he saw did not have the appearance of a single man.

The night was dark and it was not easy to distinguish anything at that distance, but it looked as though three or four persons were advancing.

"Or is it a hippopotamus?" he muttered. "They move mighty awk'ard, ez though they is bearin' some sort o' a load. Wonder what it means? Kin it be I ain't ther only one that does crooked deeds 'round hyar? I'm goin' ter know, though it might be safer fur me ter keep ter myself."

He went down on the ledge as far as was safe and, crouching down to avoid discovery, looked over.

There had been no mistake in regard to the dark object; it was made up of three men who were carrying some burden which, plainly, was not a light one.

Sam Leach was not a quick-witted man, and it was not until they were near the river that he suspected the truth.

"By ther demon!" he then exclaimed, "they've got a man, an' they're goin' ter chuck him inter ther whirlpool!"

He half-started up, and then sunk back.

"I'll keep ter myself!" he muttered.

There was no longer room to doubt that he was about to witness a tragedy. Some poor wretch had fallen under the ban of enemies more powerful than he, and Mad river would end it all.

They arrived at the water's edge.

At that point the river had cut a channel for itself and flowed in a canal. A few feet below it struck the ledge, whirled around almost in a ring, and then shot away south at a furious speed, as though angry at being checked.

Leach saw that the helpless wretch they held would have absolutely no chance at all if cast

in the water. He would be dashed against Madrock's base, and the shock could not but prove fatal.

The watcher felt considerable sympathy for him, and he would have interfered had he been able, but he had no desire to go down and pick a quarrel with three men for the sake of one unknown to him.

Better keep to himself and let the deed be consummated.

The unknown paused but a moment; then they grasped their burden the tighter, swung it back, forward, back again—and then with a strong swing it was cast into the water.

In the whirl and roar of the river Leach heard no splash, but he saw the dark water close over the helpless man, like a monster greedy for prey.

Then followed a period of inaction. All watched the point where the water struck the ledge, though well aware that, under such circumstances, they could see nothing.

"That's ther eend!" muttered Leach.

The three men turned away, and the watcher crouched closer to the rock to avoid discovery.

"I'd like ter know who them critters be. Like ez not ef I did know I could turn ther knowledge ter my gain. By ther Eternal! I'll try it!"

He skulked across the ledge until he reached a point where he could safely descend. By that time the three men were walking rapidly toward the village, and he moved after them at a trot. Just as he was closing in well, however, they separated, and he saw that he could follow but one. He selected his man, and kept on with the skill of an Indian.

The pursued entered the village and strode along at a swinging pace. Now and then he looked about, as though his mind was uneasy after his crime and he feared detection, but Leach took care not to be seen.

At last the man he followed paused before a large building, unlocked the door and softly entered.

Leach looked at the house sharply. In one corner was an office, and over the door hung a sign,

"POST-OFFICE."

"Aba!" muttered the trailer, "so this is whar he herds. Wal, now, it ain't hard ter figure light out o' this matter. He had a key an' entered freely, an' it follers that he was Joseph Danforth, Esquire, Postmaster o' Bowlder Bar. Good! I hev one o' ther big-bugs o' ther borough on ther hip, an' I'll work ther case up when I hev time. He shall pay well ter keep this matter shady. Now fur Hamed!"

He retraced his steps to Madrock Ledge, went to the door and again rapped.

As before, Sing-So opened the door, and even his patient face bore a look of disgust as he saw who it was; but he admitted that Hamed was in, and after that it was not easy to keep Leach out.

While they were still bickering, Hamed, himself, made his appearance from the inner room, and when he saw who the visitor was he at once asked him in.

Leach followed to the inner room, and then the Magician faced him with his usual calm manner.

"You are late with your report," he said.

"What report?"

"Of the business in which I employed you."

"Didn't Bill Wild do that?"

"Your friend has not been here."

"He hasn't, eh?"

"No."

Leach looked at the Magician in a hostile way. He was strong in the faith that this man had brought harm to his pard, and he intended to have satisfaction in one way or another.

"Now, you needn't go fur ter give me no sech taffy ez that. I ain't no clod. Bill came hyer fur ter make ther report, an' what I want is ter know what ye did with him."

"I repeat, he has not been here, nor do I know how he met his death."

"Met his death!" echoed Leach, starting up from his chair, while a look of fury crossed his bronzed face. "Do ye mean ter tell me Bill Wild is dead?"

CHAPTER XVII.

HAMED'S HEAVY HAND.

HAMED could not misunderstand the look bent upon him, but he remained as calm as ever.

"I supposed you had heard of it," he said.

"Heerd o' what? Come, speak out; no backin' an' shiflin', fur I'm a man that won't b'ar it. Speak out!"

He started to obey an impulse to grasp the Magician's arm, but the latter coolly uncovered and extended a revolver.

"Keep back!" he said. "I do not covet close acquaintance with you. If you want to talk, well and good. First of all, let me say your friend is dead. I waited for him all last night, but he did not come. This morning I heard that one of the stage-robbers had been found dead in Mad river. I sent Sing-So to look at the body; it was that of Bill Wild."

This statement was made in a matter-of-fact

way, despite the terrible glare of Leach's eyes. He had come there with the suspicion that there had been foul play toward his comrade, and it may be easily understood that his idea had not grown less decisive.

"By ther Eternall! thar has been foul play hyar!" he exclaimed, explosively.

"I fear so, myself."

"You 'fear' so! Darn yer flint-hide! you're ther reptyle that done it; you're ther lousy serpent that sent Bill over ther divide!" asserted Leach, shaking his fist at the unmoved Magician.

"I?"

"Yes, you! You needn't speak so mighty scornful, fur I hev it down fine."

"You're out of your head!"

"I never hev been in my head yet, but I'm in my skin, an' I'm a tough hoss ter ride when you use a spur. I say you killed Bill Wild, an' I'll make you holler fur it. He was my pard, Bill was, an' I never shake sech. You got him in hyar, an' then, ter save payin' what ye agreed, ye killed an' flung him in Mad river. Mebbe you think you kin use me ther same way, but you will find I'm the biggest dynamite bomb ye ever ketched onto; you kin bet yer life on that!"

"Be calm!" said Hamed, icily. "You do not talk like a sensible man. I tell you your friend did not come here. Had he done so, he would have received the money I promised. As it is, I suppose you are his heir, and I shall pay you the whole."

Sam was silent for a moment, for he had not expected this; but to his credit, be it said, his devotion to his late partner was even greater than his greed.

"You think you kin bribe me, but you can't!" he declared. "I say you killed Bill an' flung him in Mad river, an' I ain't ter be bought off. More than that, I'll hev revenge! I'll tear ye in pieces—"

"That's enough!" sharply interrupted Hamed, as he again presented his revolver. "I have heard enough of your abuse, and I will hear no more. Here is the money due you; take it and get out of my house!"

He extended a purse which clinked with the weight of gold-pieces, but Sam struck it a blow which sent it spinning half-way across the room.

"No, ye don't!" he exclaimed. "I won't take a red cent of it, but I'll take—"

He attempted to dash the revolver aside in the same way he had the money, at the same time springing forward, but the Magician's fist shot out, and the fellow fell with a crash.

He slowly arose to a sitting position, and stupidly rubbed his head.

"Let that be a lesson!" Hamed sternly said. "I laugh at you and your threats, and advise you to keep away if you value your life. I will bear no more."

Leach gathered himself to his feet with a slowness which spoke well for the force of the blow which had prostrated him.

"You've won ther first round," he said, with a moderation which told of deep purpose; "but I ain't out o' ther game yet, an' I sha'n't be till I lay ye out. Bill Wild was my pard, an' a good one, an' I'm sure his death lays at your door. I hold ter ther rule that an eye should pay fur an eye, an' I'll make ye sick! Besides, you've struck me, an' I never forgive a blow!"

"You are a fool!" the Magician contemptuously said, "and as I do not care to talk with such a man, I'll merely bid you do your worst and finish our interview. There is the door; leave here or I will put a bullet through you!"

He raised his revolver and covered Sam with an unwavering hand, and the latter saw that, like the Chinese, he had got to go. So far as the going was concerned, he was not sorry, for he wished to know more concerning how Wild died, if possible, before he moved; but it was hard for a fighting-man to be thus driven away.

"I'll go, but I'll take my time fur it," he surely answered.

"Make it a short time, then."

"Don't hurry."

"I shall hurry!" said Hamed, with sudden fire. "I will bear no more of your insolence in my own house. I give you until I count ten to go; if you are then here I will shoot you like the dog you are!"

He began to count in an inexorable voice, but Sam had no intention of being shot down, and he backed toward the door and out of it without another word.

He was defeated for the time, but he belonged to the class of men not easily kept down.

While he lived it would be war to the knife between him and the Magician of Madrock Ledge.

Ettala Danforth had failed to find her "burglar," and she was compelled to endure a good deal of banter from her brother on the subject; but her opinion that there had been a man in the store-room did not waver. She suspected that Luke Burbank might have told who he was and how he escaped; she did not consider the gambler any too good to keep off a criminal;

and she determined to watch and see if any new developments occurred in the case.

All passed quietly that night, and if there were dark doings about the house she heard nothing of them.

But she had not seen the last of the burglar episode.

The following morning she entered the store-room for a more careful search, taking care to do so when Joseph was busy in the office.

Her search was not in vain.

Upon the rough surface of the boards and timbers, at the point where she had heard the strange stirring, she found small particles of woolen goods; sure evidence, she argued, that a man had been there, just as she had claimed.

Nor was this all. In removing some of these particles she noticed dark spots on the boards, and when she had obtained a light she saw that they were of a bright-red hue.

"Blood!" she whispered, a frightened look appearing on her face.

It was not strange she was moved. There is always something affecting about a blood-stain which has not been accounted for in a matter-of-fact way, and for a while she felt unnerved. Dark suspicions, strong though vague, floated through her mind, and she feared the mysterious disappearance of the man under the floor was accounted for in a way in which she would not have even a burglar vanish from sight.

After a short time, however, she caught at a more agreeable theory. The man might have scratched himself on some nail; her vague suspicions might have no ground.

She replaced the boards, and, resuming her work, tried to be content with her last theory, but her mind would not be at ease.

Somewhat later she relieved Joseph in the office, but she said nothing about her discovery.

Perhaps half an hour had passed when David Bond entered the office. It was their first meeting since the night when he rescued her from Mose Devlin, and as she did not undervalue that service, she greeted him with kind words and a look which told that they were wholly sincere.

There was something about the giant which pleased her—his massive build; strong, but irregular, features; and the steady light of his large eyes. He had appeared to her as a hero, and he certainly seemed able to sustain his reputation.

Yet he was so little accustomed to ladies' society that a flush arose to his face as she warmly thanked him, and his motions and speech were awkward as he answered.

Conversation dwelt for a while on the late adventure, and Dave expressed surprise that Joseph had considered it best to let Devlin's offense go unpunished, but as it had become war to the knife between the pugilist and himself, he felt that it would seem like cowardice to urge prosecution, himself.

He had, however, come on business, and he proceeded to explain it.

"Have you see'd anything o' Silver-Plated Sol?" he asked.

"I saw him yesterday, with Joseph, but not since."

"Wal, I'd like ter know whar he has been sence. He said he was goin' ter call on Mr. Danforth, and that he'd see me last night, but he ain't showed up, an' he ain't been at the Flowing Bowl Hotel sence yesterday mornin'. It is sorter curious."

"I do not think he called at the house. I saw him pass the door of the office with my brother, but Joseph did not mention that he went in, and he certainly was not there when I closed the office."

"I can't imagine whar he's gone," said Dave, "but I'll go out an' look furder."

He went and Ettala was left alone, and then for the first time, a suspicion flashed upon the girl.

The disappearance of Silver-Plated Sol, after having been with Joseph, had been immediately followed by the events connected with the man under the floor.

It was a startling recollection, and events wheeled into line to make it suspicious. She remembered the locked door of the store-room, and how Joseph sat in front of it and, for awhile, laughingly refused to move; and another peculiar incident came to her mind. She remembered the talk she overheard between Joseph and Luke Burbank, in which they spoke of a drug which the gambler was to furnish.

"Good heavens!" she thought, "can it be this Silver-Plated Sol was drugged and then—and then—Can it be he was the man under the floor; that it was his life-blood I saw; that Burbank and my brother combined against him, and that he is dead?"

CHAPTER XIX.

"WHO IS HAMED?"

It has before been remarked that the Magician of Madrock Ledge had seldom, or never, been seen abroad since he first occupied the house on the rock. Consequently, it would have been somewhat of a surprise had the peo-

ple in general seen him slowly descend the ledge, on the afternoon of the day of which we last wrote, and move toward the village.

But, as chance would have it, there was no one who observed him, and he made his way unnoticed and unmolested to a small house at the south side of the place.

It was owned by a man named Shaw, who was superintendent of a mine, and, besides himself, the household consisted of his wife, sister and Lois Orme.

Ever since the latter came to Bowlder Bar, she had boarded with the family, and they had proved good, though humble friends.

On this afternoon Lois was alone in the house. Shaw was at his work, and the women were visiting, and Lois was sewing in the sitting-room, alone, and, as she supposed, not likely to be disturbed.

Hamed, however, went straight to the house, opened the door and walked in without ceremony. If he was not personally acquainted with the interior of the place, the "stars" must have given him substantial aid, for he made his way at once to the room where she was sitting.

As the door opened she looked up carelessly, and then sat amazed at sight of the Magician. Naturally of a courageous nature, she did not feel alarmed, but she would as soon have expected to see the President.

He noticed her surprise and smiled slightly.

"Have no fear," he said, reassuringly. "I have come as a man, not as a magician, and only to have a friendly talk. In other words, I am repaying your visit."

"Perhaps you want me to tell your fortune now?" she suggested, rallying.

"Scarcely, for I have come to speak wholly of you."

"Of me?"

"Yes."

"I do not see what needs to be said concerning me," she answered, coldly.

"There is more than you think, or I should not be here. Your career is a somewhat remarkable one, and can not be too fully discussed."

"Excuse me, but I do not agree with you."

"No?"

"No, sir. I do not see any necessity for discussing my affairs at all, sir."

"Yet, I do not think you will refuse my request."

"I do; I must. Do not presume upon my visit to you to continue our acquaintance. That was merely in a professional line, and you should have no personal interest in it, and no desire to speak of it further. I must ask you to drop the subject."

Lois spoke firmly, but Hamed at once answered, in a disagreeable tone:

"Do you command it?"

The girl hesitated.

"You can hardly afford to do that, situated as you are. I know that the heirs of Abram Selden, possessed of new evidence—evidence which seems to show that you were really concerned in the disappearance of Selden's money—are anxious to find Bertha Wardner, and I know you are she."

The color had retreated somewhat from Lois's face, and it was plain that she felt her position, but her nature was not of the cowering kind and there was a defiant gleam in her eyes.

"Do you mean to say you would betray me?"

"Suppose I answer affirmatively?"

"It would be a cowardly thing to do!" she cried, passionately.

"Now, you talk with reason. You really admit my power; consequently, you will not refuse to talk rationally. Do so, and you will find I am by no means your enemy. I wish to say, right at the beginning, that I am fully informed in regard to this case—"

"By the 'stars?'" she sarcastically asked.

"That part is immaterial. Enough that you are Bertha Wardner, and that you are living here under an assumed name to avoid the heirs of Abram Selden. I could also tell something about Charles Winter and Roger Hillard, whom they are anxious to find, but we will drop that part of it. Now, I'll tell you why I am interested."

"Well?"

"When you visited me at Madrock Ledge mention was made of your father, who left you and your mother when you were a small child. Let us now talk of him."

"What of him?" Lois asked, with renewed interest.

"He lives."

"Ah!"

"Yes, and, moreover, is interested in your case."

"Then, he had better come forward and show his interest. It would be more fatherly than to keep in the background," the girl bitterly said.

"Believe me, he has good reasons for his course. I speak with authority, for I am free to confess I am his agent."

"You have been a long while in mentioning it."

"I am acting under orders."

"And where does this man of mystery keep himself—from what point does he issue his orders?"

"That I am forbidden to tell," answered Hamed, as calmly as though there had been no sarcasm in her voice.

"He is at liberty to keep in concealment, but if his orders to you partake of the nature of an order to me, you need not repeat them. I have fought my own battle, fatherless and motherless, for nearly a score of years, and I am capable of doing so longer. You can report to him that the daughter he deserted, when she was a child, has no desire to hear from him at this late day."

"You speak bitterly, recklessly, unreasonably," was the unmoved reply. "Be governed by your wiser instincts and talk calmly. Your father had good reasons for leaving his home when he did, though he cannot explain at present. Now, he wishes to link his fortunes with yours; he wishes to help you now you are menaced by trouble."

"How will he help me?" Lois incredulously asked.

"He takes the same view of the case that you do," blandly answered Hamed; "he thinks that Abram Selden's wealth rightfully belongs to you; and he will help you battle against your enemies."

"What message does he send?" she slowly asked.

"First of all, he bids you be firm to the end. He says the money of Abram Selden is yours, for you were his adopted daughter by love, if not legally, and the fact that no will was produced only shows that he had no time to make one. Mr. Wardner bids you retain Selden's money."

The magician was looking straight at Lois. The blue spectacles bid his eyes, but she felt sure the gaze was a keen one, for all of that.

"What else?" she calmly asked.

"I am directed to watch over you, and to warn you if I see evidence that the Selden heirs have discovered you. Also, he bids you put confidence in me, and let me help protect you and the Selden money."

"What else?"

"There is nothing more at present."

"You have said quite enough," she said, with subdued vehemence. "It is now my turn. You assume that I am in possession of the Selden money. You never made a greater mistake. I have not a dollar of it, and I am glad it is so. If I had, the Selden heirs could brand me a thief, for I have nothing to show that I was entitled to it. Be careful that you do not make the same mistake. I repeat, I have not one dollar of Abram Selden's money!"

She had arisen and stood before him with her form drawn to its fullest height, and her face proud and set with what seemed real disdain of his charge and an expression of her own honor.

A disappointed look was on his countenance.

"But—"

"Hear me through," she interrupted. "When I visited you, in my foolish curiosity, you asserted that there was a forged will once in existence which gave nearly all Selden's money to me, and that it was the work of Charles Winter and myself. There was a will of that purport, but it was a genuine document, freely executed by Abram Selden. It fell into the hands of Roger Hillard, and he was unjust enough to think it forged. For that, he deserted me."

"This will, however, was never seen by Charles Winter, who was never anything to me more than a passing acquaintance. The will was genuine, and in it Mr. Selden gave nearly all his wealth to me; but when I knew of Roger Hillard's unjust suspicion, I thrust it in the fire and thus ended my hopes. In conclusion, I left the neighborhood almost penniless, and I do not know what became of Selden's missing money."

Deep dissatisfaction was expressed on Hamed's face as he heard this statement. For once, his cold self-possession was shaken, and it was clear he was angry as well as disappointed.

"Your father will scarcely believe this statement," he muttered.

"Do you speak authoritatively?"

"I believe I do."

"I do not doubt it," Lois answered, with a hard laugh. "My dear sir, do not for a moment suppose I am deceived by all your round-about speeches. I know you! You are Bernard Wardner, the man fate most cruelly made my father; the man who deserted his wife and infant daughter; the man who carefully kept out of sight until, believing his daughter was a thief, he generously stepped forward to share her ill-gotten gains! Ay, I know you at last, and, I assure you, I am proud of such a parent. Most noble, faithful, magnanimous and affectionate of men, your daughter knows you at last!"

Words can poorly describe the bitterness and sarcasm with which she spoke, and those who had known Hamed in his moments of professional dignity would have been amazed to see him cower then.

He stood silent and, apparently, confounded, and for a while there was silence in the room which was so deep that the sounds of the street seemed to assume thrice their usual volume. Hamed, the great, the mysterious, the strong-minded, had nothing to say.

CHAPTER XX.

DEVELOPMENTS THICKEN.

LOIS was satisfied to let the Magician speak first. She saw that she had gained a point, and she was anxious to see what he would say next.

"You have no ground for such a suspicion," he finally managed to answer.

"I have all the ground in the world—truth. Do you deny the charge?"

"I do. I, Bernard Wardner? Nonsense! I never saw you in my life until I came to Boulder Bar."

"Denial is easy now, but you betrayed yourself during the first few moments of your surprise. I am sorry to say, I have no doubt but you are my father. Abandon the mask of being his agent, and let us deal directly with each other. As I before asserted, you deserted me and my mother basely, long years ago, and you made no effort to see me until you had reason to believe I had a large sum of money. Then you became anxious to effect a reconciliation, so you could share in the ill-gotten gains. Unluckily for you, I have not a cent of Abram Selden's money, and so ends your dream; but I have a word more to say. You need not trouble yourself further about me, for words cannot express the scorn and contempt in which I hold you. False husband and father, you are beneath my notice, and I hope you will not cross my path again."

By this time the Magician's old coolness and audacity had returned, and he laughed mockingly.

"You assume the airs of a tragedy queen, my dear, but they have no effect on me. I have lived long enough in this world to be impervious to common emotions. More than this, I am a man who never abandons an attempt once made. Whatever design I have on you will be carried out inexorably."

"What can you do?"

"Nothing, perhaps you think."

"I did not say so."

"Your tone indicated it. Well, since I hoped for an alliance with you, I cannot tell just what I shall do, but you may depend upon it, I shall fail in nothing I undertake. I never do. It will be wiser for you to reconsider your decision and let me be your friend."

"I decline," was the cold reply.

"Have it as you will, but you will live to regret it. Wait! I will give you two days in which to meditate. If you change your mind, come to me and say so. Then, all will be well. If you do not come, beware!"

He moved abruptly toward the door as he spoke, and, knowing a word from him would betray her to the Selden heirs, Lois dared not answer defiantly.

At the door he paused for a moment and looked at her steadily. She did not speak, and, with a faint smile curving his bearded lips, he turned again.

"Good-day!"

And then Hamed was gone and she was alone; alone to meet her fears and troubles, and the dark shadows of the future which menaced her with bitter woe.

A few hours before the interview last described a man languidly opened his eyes and looked around him in a small cabin near the western side of the village.

He did not seem to recognize his surroundings, and a puzzled look was wanting to his face when another man came forward to his side.

"How do you find yourself, Silver-Plated Sol?" he asked.

"Ah! is that you, Lovering?" asked the man on the bed. "I had begun to think I was out of my longitude, but your face is familiar. Where am I?"

"In a cabin I have 'jumped,' for this occasion only. You see, I made for the nearest shelter when I pulled you out of Mad river."

Sol Colton started. His mind had been confused, but it cleared at the last words. He made an effort to sit upright, and, though it proved that his old strength was lacking, did so despite Lovering's advice to remain quiet.

"I remember," he said. "I—I fell into the river."

"Yes, through the aid of three men," said Lovering, dryly.

The rover looked at him searchingly.

"You saw it all, then?"

"Yes."

There was silence for a moment, and then Sol slowly asked:

"How did I get out?"

"I leaped in and pulled you out. It would have been a useless venture, I am thinking, only it seemed you had already freed your hands, and you helped me a good deal, though in a way instinctive rather than reasoning I think."

"You are right. I remember nothing after I was thrown in, except a desperate effort to keep from being dashed against the ledge. I am a good deal at sea; be so good as to give me light on the subject."

Silver-Plated Sol had had an eventful experience. He went to Joseph Danforth's room with

out a suspicion that he was placing himself in the power of the man he wished to find, but not in such a way. The postmaster had received the promised drug from Burbank, and he administered it in wine without trouble.

They had talked about the decoy letter, by which Colton hoped to learn the identity of "A. B. C.," until he grew sleepy and soon lost consciousness. Then Danforth bound and gagged him, and stowed him away under the floor of the store-room. It had been expected that the drug would keep him unconscious until night, but, from some reason, its effects partially passed away in a short time.

Sol came back to the power of life and motion, but his head did not clear. He was in this condition, and restlessly moving about, when Ettala heard him and so much excitement ensued. In his restless movements, too, he scratched one of his hands on a nail, so that it bled freely.

As soon as Burbank was rid of the girls, he went to the prisoner, took him out, conveyed him to the post-office and concealed him behind a case where there was little danger of his being found. He was tempted to kill him outright, but finally concluded not to do it.

At midnight the prisoner was taken out by Danforth, Burbank and Devlin, and conveyed to the river. By that time his head was clear. He recognized his captors and realized his own danger, and as his motto was to never give up, he managed to abstract a knife from Devlin's belt as he was being carried, despite the fact that his hands were bound.

When he was thrown into the river he was wholly on the alert. He knew if he was dashed against Madrock Ledge his fate would be sealed. So he worked with the energy of desperation. His first move was to cut his bonds, and then he struggled bravely to baffle the swift current which was carrying him on toward the fatal rocks of the ledge.

Luckily for him, Lovering had been abroad and had seen the tragedy, and he at once plunged in to his rescue, unseen, in the darkness and tumult of the river, by the would-be murderers.

It was a hard fight, and for a while he seemed likely to share the fate from which he wished to save Colton, but there was more strength in his arms than one would think, and he succeeded at last in reaching the bank again.

Once there he was so exhausted that he lay for a long time almost motionless; lay until the doers of the dark deed, as well as the watcher from the cliff, Sam Leach, had gone away; and then he managed to get Sol to the cabin.

The latter soon recovered, but he was in a dazed state produced by the drug, his confinement in the house, and the river adventure; and he said nothing rational, but soon fell into a deep sleep.

From this he had finally awakened in his right mind.

When Lovering had explained his share in the rescue he was warmly thanked, and then, as he knew some account was necessary and did not wish to tell the truth, he began a fictitious explanation, but Lovering soon interrupted.

"Excuse me, but you have unconsciously revealed more of the facts of the case by your mutterings than your story seems likely to reveal. You have said enough, too, to give me reason to believe we are mutually interested in a certain case—one which concerns Roger Hillard!"

The rover started.

"What do you know of Hillard?" he asked.

"Enough so that I wished to meet him, but I judge from what you have said that he is dead. You, it seems, wish to know his past. What I want is to know his present, or, rather, of the later events of his life."

"Are you his friend or foe?"

"His friend, and yours, if you will have it so. Come, let us join forces and work together. I can tell a strange story, and one which may interest you, in return for your confidence."

Sol meditated for awhile, but he could see no good reason for suspecting Lovering to be an enemy—had he not proved the contrary by saving his life?—and he decided to make a clean breast of it.

Accordingly, he told, briefly but clearly, the story of Roger Hillard's death, and his own subsequent efforts to discover the perpetrators of the deed.

Lovering was silent for a moment after he finished, and then he abruptly said:

"I believe I have the key to the mystery!"

"Tell it, and you shall be well rewarded."

"I want no reward, but I'll speak all the same. Roger Hillard once lived in a small Illinois town, and this is the story that they tell there: Roger loved a young woman named Bertha Wardner. She was the adopted daughter of a rich bachelor named Abram Selden, her parents being dead. All went on smoothly, and the marriage seemed a sure thing, until Selden began to fail in health."

"Then, people say, Bertha saw she was not going to get his wealth, and she formed the idea of forging a will giving her all. Roger declined to help her, and she took up with another lover, named Charles Winter. Between then

a will was forged, and Hillard saw it, but it served to kill out what love he had, and he abruptly left Illinois. It was then he came to Montana."

"I do not see your connection yet."

"Wait! Somehow, the forged will was not used, and Selden died without a word as to how his money should be disposed of, but when it was looked for, lo! something like twenty thousand dollars were missing. Bertha Wardner was accused of taking it, but proof was wanting, and, before the matter was fully settled, both she and Charles Winter disappeared—fled together, the good people of Illinois say."

CHAPTER XXI.

ETTALA SEEKS AN ALLY.

"I begin to see where the connection may come in," observed Silver-Plated Sol.

"It is but a suspicion with me, but it is a persistent one just at present. My idea is this: Joseph Danforth is Charles Winter, the former accomplice of Bertha Wardner. Of course she is near; where, we have yet to learn. The efforts of the Selden heirs to find the money, and Bertha, have not ceased. They want to find the girl, Winter and Roger Hillard."

"Now, I argue like this: Winter, alias Danforth, knew of this search, and they knew that Hillard could tell something damaging about them. Possibly he knew all about the theft of the money, but kept quiet because of the love he once bore Bertha. They, however, had no such scruples, and, fearing he would betray them, they went to Red Summit and killed him."

"You trailed them here, but, luckily or unluckily, went straight to Winter, alias Danforth, for information."

"Yes," interrupted Sol, "and when I asked him to help me find out who was expecting a letter addressed to 'A. B. C.' I was talking with that precise person then. I see; I put my foot in it, and the postmaster did his level best to get me in all over; and it's not due to any sagacity on my part that he didn't succeed."

"You need not reproach yourself, for you did just what any one else would have done under similar circumstances; went to one of the foremost men of the town for aid."

"Yes, but I won't do it again," said Sol, dryly. "With your help I am at last on the trail. Roger Hillard was put out of the way because he knew too much, and the deed was done by Danforth and a female accomplice. Now, who was this female?"

"That is what we must learn."

"He has a sister."

"Oh! it wasn't her!" Lovering exclaimed.

"I agree with you. Miss Ettala is not that kind of a person."

"We must interview some resident of the town who will be able to tell us with whom Danforth is intimate; then we'll have the matter down fine."

"To speak in the Greek, we'll have the earth," said Sol, who was fast recovering his old buoyancy of spirit. "Well, I know just the man. I have struck up a friendship with a man here named Dave Bond. He's an honest fellow, and will be just the one we want."

"By the way, you haven't asked me why I am in the case."

"I'm waiting for you to explain."

"Well, I am working as an amateur detective, hoping to get a reward from the Selden heirs."

Colter did not question the explanation, nor seem much interested in it, but as Lovering had on a previous occasion claimed to be a Selden heir himself, there was still room for some doubts in regard to him.

Some talk then ensued as to Sol's proper course for the future. Lovering suggested that he assume a disguise and return to work that way, but Sol had little faith in his ability to act such a part, and it was finally decided that he should keep out of sight altogether for a while, keeping close to the cabin.

That evening they would have Giant Dave there and question him in regard to Joseph Danforth's associates, and if they could decide who accompanied him on his murderous mission, they would then know just how to go to work to envelop the guilty parties in a web of evidence.

Both men congratulated themselves on the new union. Lovering had found Hillard, or all that he ever could find of that unfortunate man, and he felt sure that Danforth was Charles Winter. His mission which had seemed hopeless a little before, had a beacon-light at last.

Silver-Plated Sol now had strong hopes of avenging Roger Hillard's murder, and his zeal was not decreased by the fact that the same man had attempted his own life. He was, for once, tempted to take the law into his own hands and bring the matter to a decisive end, but his passion soon passed and he repeated his old rule that the law was the greatest of all avengers.

Ettala was thrown into a miserable mood by the discoveries she had made. Silver-Plated Sol was missing, and appearances indicated

that he had met with foul play under the very roof that sheltered her. The man under the floor, and the stains of blood, were not to be forgotten.

Again and again she asked herself what motive could have inspired this deed. She had tried to believe her brother had no share in it, but all indications were to the effect that he had, and she was obliged to abandon the position.

But Silver-Plated Sol might be alive after all. Surely, Joseph would not injure him, or allow him to be injured under their roof. There might be a mistake somewhere, after all, or there might be a plot against Joseph—

She conjectured a host of theories, and at last succeeded in convincing herself—or thought she did—that Joseph was an ill-used and persecuted man. What could she do to help him?

"I know he is innocent!" she repeated, again and again, but it was a noteworthy feature of her so-called confidence that she did not go to her brother, or let him know that she suspected anything.

She did feel, however, that she must have some one to confide in. Whom could she trust? Lois? Yes, the latter could be trusted; but she was the girl whom Joseph loved, and hardly the person to seek in such a case.

To whom, then, could she go?

Like the sound of water to a thirsty man came the recollection of Dave Bond. His towering figure, with its ox-like strength, his square, resolute face, honest, though plain and unpretentious—the mere recollection of him served to ease one-half the pain in her heart.

Had she stopped to think clearly, remembering that he was Sol Colton's friend, she might not have gone to him, but she acted under the impulse of the moment and, seeing it was just about time for him to return from work at the mine, she threw on her coquettish hat and hurried away.

She encountered no one on the way who questioned her, and soon arrived at Giant Dave's humble residence. He was not visible, and at the door she hesitated for a moment. Her step might seem bold and unmaidenly, and, though naturally one of the brightest and most buoyant of girls, she had a due regard for what the world would say; but she put aside fastidiousness as she remembered her errand, and entered.

Giant Dave was at home.

He had returned from the mine, cleared away some of the signs of his labor, and was engaged in preparing his supper. At the moment when Ettala entered he was standing near the fire with a kettle in his hand, presenting the absurd appearance that an unprofessional male cook usually does, and, as he had been worried by some culinary trifles, looking hot and unhappy.

Ettala took in the whole thing at one glance. Her acute feminine eyes saw the cause of trouble and the means of relief, and she again yielded to impulse and started forward.

"Let me help you, Mr. Bond!"

If the cabin had enlarged about him and transformed itself into a circus tent, with a thousand spectators and the greatest show on earth in the interior; or if the kettle had insisted on walking the tight-rope on a clothes-line, or on playing a game of *keno* with the broom, Giant Dave would not have been more astonished.

He had not heard Ettala, nor seen her, until she spoke, and when she had done that he was simply struck dumb. Still holding the kettle, he stared blankly at her and said nothing.

"Just let me take charge, and you sit down, and I will soon have your supper prepared," said the girl, as she deftly relieved him of the kettle.

He was conscious of muttering a feeble protest against her taking so much trouble upon herself—just what he said he did not know, and it is doubtful if she did.

"It is no trouble at all," she asserted. "Please sit down, and I will soon have your supper ready."

He sat down and, in a dazed way, watched her. As she flitted about, lithe and active, his mind went back along the lapse of years to the time when, younger than he was then, he used to watch that sister of whom he had once spoken, as she prepared supper for himself and his giant brothers.

The recollection did not serve to add to his presence of mind, and he answered only in monosyllables as Ettala talked while she worked.

Finally the meal was prepared, and she placed it neatly upon his rude table, and drew up the equally rude chair.

By that time Dave Bond had wholly lost his head. Such a bright presence had never before dawned upon his cabin life, and, even while he wished it might remain forever, he began to doubt if it was really there; to wonder if it was not the creation of a dream.

But he took his place at the table with a degree of satisfaction new to him; if the meal had been prepared by a queen it would have been less satisfactory; and, somehow, it had a taste never before observed by him. He had been accustomed to regard meat as simply meat, but he began to think that, when cooked by Ettala,

it was something else. At any rate, it was far better than usual.

He managed to express his thanks, and a delicate compliment, and he did it in a really creditable way, and as the girl had resolved not to mention business until he was done eating, she was so pleased at having pleased him that they had an animated conversation.

Dave forgot to wonder why such a strange thing had happened, in the satisfaction of having her there, and he would have been glad had the interview never come to an end.

When he had finished eating, however, the romantic gave place to the practical, and Ettala abruptly asked:

"Mr. Bond, are you my friend?"

It was a startling question, but Giant Dave had so rallied that all the manliness of his nature was at the front, and he was not to be thrown off his guard again.

"You kin bet your life I am, Miss Ettala!" he emphatically answered.

"I thought so, and I am glad of it, for I am in trouble and want an ally, and I did not know to whom to go except to you. Therefore, I've come to see if you'll help me in my trouble."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SLEEPING LION AROUSED.

GIANT DAVE was surprised to hear that Ettala was in trouble, for he had always supposed her life was a sort of rose-garden existence, but his answer came promptly:

"You can command me in any way you see fit ter speak, Miss Danforth. I'm a rough, rude fellow, but I hope I ain't so low an' mean that I'm blind ter the fact that you're ther finest gal in Bowlder Bar—Don't be mad, fur I mean wal," he suddenly broke off, frightened lest she should take offense at his plain speaking.

"I'm not angry, and I'm glad you think well of me," she said, a slight flush appearing in her cheeks.

"I'd die fur you!" he said, quickly—"though I'd rather live. There! I didn't mean ter say that, but you hev spoke kind an' gentle ter me, an' I know ther good o' a word o' that kind. But I'm wand'rin' way off ther track; you said you was in trouble. How kin I help you?"

There was not much room to doubt the state of Giant Dave's feelings toward the girl after that explosive utterance, but, though Ettala's cheeks were quite pink, she did not speak, or look, as though she was angry.

Hadn't such a comely young giant a right to tell her he admired her? Certainly, and it was her privilege to reciprocate, if she saw fit, though, of course—But why should we argue the matter when there is no opposition?

"Have you seen Silver-Plated Sol yet?" she asked, as her thoughts took a practical turn.

"No," he slowly answered.

"Where do you think he is?"

"I wish I knew. I'm afeerd harm has come ter him."

"In what way?"

"That's what I don't know. Your brother, Mr. Danforth, says Sol didn't call on him, as he intended, so it is all a mixed-up mess. Thar are toughs in Bowlder Bar, an' it may be Sol run afoul o' some o' them."

"Can't you do something to solve the mystery?"

"That's jest what I'm tryin' ter do, but I can't get any light on ther subject."

"Suppose I give you the name of a man I think worthy of being watched?"

"Then I'll watch him," was the quick reply.

"Who is he?"

"I'm afraid suspicion will fall on the wrong man," said Ettala, "and I want it where it belongs."

"Sart'in, sart'in," Dave coincided.

"Well, the man I want you to watch is Luke Burbank."

"Ther gambler?"

"Yes."

"He's a big enough rascal ter deserve watchin', but do you really think he was consarned in Sol's disappearance?"

Before Ettala could answer heavy steps echoed on the floor, and as they turned they saw Burbank, himself. His face was a panorama. It was white with passion, and other emotions were there too thickly to be enumerated, but these, taken with his clinched hands, showed that he was in a terrible rage.

"I'm here to answer for myself!" he said, in a loud voice.

No one replied, but the gleam in Dave's eyes showed that he resented the intrusion, as well as the eavesdropping which was revealed by his words. How much he had heard they had no means of knowing, but he had plainly appeared when he did because the conversation had taken a turn dangerous to him.

"I want it to be clearly understood that I won't tolerate such a use of my name. I know nothing about your precious Silver-Plated Sol, and I won't have my name connected with his. Do you understand that, you big lubber?"

Giant Dave's great hand closed over the edge of the table as though he would crush the board.

"You sart'ly make yourself plain," he answered, mildly, but with a huskiness which told of suppressed passion.

"You'll find I'll make myself plain before I am through!" the gambler hissing said.

"Ef you've got aught ter say, I'll hear it bime-by."

"You'll hear it now!" Burbank declared.

"You forgit thar's a lady hyar."

"I'm willing she should see me flog you."

"Mr. Burbank," interrupted Ettala, "I beg that—"

"I'll speak with you later," he curtly said.

"First of all, I'm going to make this fellow re-"

pent so free a use of my name."

"B'ar in mind I hev no quarrel with you," said Dave, still mildly.

"I don't ask you to quarrel, but to fight!"

"An' I refuse. I ain't a fightin' man, an' I don't want no trouble with you. I don't want trouble with no one. Go away now, an' I'll see you ag'in."

"And leave Miss Danforth here? Not I! Her place is not with so low a fellow as you. Joseph will be shocked when he hears she has been here, and, after this, he will take care to preserve the reputation for which she don't seem to care."

Giant Dave arose. His face was as white as it could be through the bronze, but there was no trembling of his limbs; he was icily calm, except for the terrible gleam in his eyes.

"Don't do that!" he exclaimed. "Don't say aught ag'in' her; it won't do!"

"All Bowlder Bar will have something to say if they know of this visit."

"They'll lie ef they say --- it ag'in' her."

"Appearances speak pl.ier than your words," the gambler sneered.

Dave moved further forward.

"Luke Burbank, I'm a man o' peace, an' I'd hate ter lay a hand on you, but I'll throw you out o' ther house ef you speak thus ag'in'!"

"I shall say what I please, and I shall publicly proclaim that the girl visits you here."

Burbank was playing with fire, but he was fool enough not to know it. Alarmed at the conversation he had interrupted, he felt the need of making a side-issue to turn the current, and he caught at what he plainly saw was Bond's one vulnerable point. He knew not the danger he was thus daring. He had never been told how Dave had vanquished Mose Devlin, and he deemed the miner a big, overgrown fellow, too cowardly to fight. He thought he was safe enough in sneering.

Ettala, after her last attempt to speak, had stood dumb with mortification and surprise. The unjust interpretation put upon her visit cut her to the heart, and she lacked the power to defend herself then.

Not so Dave Bond. He had a fiery temper, and, before he learned to control it, he had been one to fight, with bare fists or weapons, at the least offense. Of late he had made a great effort to subdue his natural inclinations, but the sneers against Ettala were more than he could bear.

As the last sentence fell from Burbank's lips the giant started forward, and for the first time the gambler realized his imprudence.

The flash of those large eyes startled him.

He dropped his hand to his revolver, but he was too late.

Dave was upon him like a lion.

The feeble guard he interposed was brushed aside, and in a moment more the broad hand closed upon his throat.

"Dog!" hissed Giant Dave, "you have sealed your own fate!"

Still grasping him by the throat, he forced him back against the wall, and it seemed as though Burbank's neck would break beneath that clutch.

Ettala was dumb with terror.

Burbank put out his hands feebly, as though to implore mercy, but he made no effort to retaliate. The force of the storm he had raised swept away all his resolution.

It may be he would have died under that hold, for Bond had lost all prudence, but Ettala fortunately recovered her presence of mind. She started forward and caught Dave's arm.

"Spare him!" she implored. "In Heaven's name, do not commit murder!"

Her voice—her touch—were like water on fire. Almost instantly the giant's hands dropped down, and he stood staring blankly, dazed and trembling.

"I—I didn't know what I was doin'!" he muttered.

Burbank, freed from that crushing grasp, stood gasping by the wall. Breath and sight had nearly deserted him, but they came back gradually.

"My temper run away with me; I really didn't know what I was doin'," Dave was saying.

"I'm sorry, an' I hope you will forgive me."

"Forgive you! There is nothing to forgive. You are the bravest and noblest of men; I am proud of such a friend."

Ettala spoke warmly; the emergency served to draw them together.

But Burbank's vision had by that time cleared, and he looked at Dave with a glance which told him that murder was at his heart.

"I shall not forget this right away!" he said, pantingly.

"I had ter do it," apologetically said Giant Dave, and he was about to add that he was sorry when he remembered what had caused the trouble.

He believed himself the last man who should engage in a fight, but Ettala's honor must be maintained at all hazards.

"I have no more to say now," the gambler continued, "but you shall hear from me again. Of course such a thing as this can't be lightly passed over. My throat is nearly crushed, and no man ever laid an angry hand on me yet and lived to boast of it."

"I have no desire ter boast," said Bond, mildly, "an' I should be glad ef it could be dropped here—only Miss Danforth must not be insulted."

"Rest easy; I shall say no more about her," replied Burbank, who began to see he had taken a losing way of winning a wife. "The matter lays between you and me after this. We will settle it, too, and the settlement means death for one of us!"

With this dark threat he turned and strode away.

Dave and Ettala were left alone with each other, but the interview was cut short. The girl was frightened and unnerved, and as she was anxious to get back to her home, she bade the giant a kind good-night and hurried away.

Dave looked after her until she disappeared.

"She's an angel, of thar ever was onel" he thought. "I'm sorry she see'd me when my mad was up, fur it was a disgrace ter me. But I had ter do it!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PUGILIST PLAYS A LONE HAND.

GIANT DAVE sat down and mentally reviewed the scene just enacted. He deeply regretted the trouble with Burbank. When he settled in Bowlder Bar it was with the resolution to keep his temper under control, and his hands from his fellow-men. For a long time he had done so. He was among men who had frequent quarrels; who fought one day and forgave each other the next, or fought and held a grudge, as the case might be; and he was often sorely tempted to resent some of the sneers heaped upon him, but he had resisted temptation while he was alone concerned.

Of late he had made enemies who, he felt sure, would not let the matter drop where it was—Mose Devlin and Burbank. He had brought both to grief, and both from the same cause, to defend Ettala.

He was not sorry for what he had done, but he was sorry that the necessity had arisen.

Since he took his new stand in the world, he had looked upon woman as a creature to be respected and defended, and he had done his duty.

Whatever the consequences might be he knew he had nothing with which to reproach himself, but, as he expressed it, he "was the last person in the world who ought to fight."

Finally, his thoughts took another turn and dwelt upon Ettala's visit. It had been a remarkable occasion in his life. While she was there all had seemed to be sunshine, and he had followed her every movement with rapt admiration. Now that she was gone, the place seemed dark and gloomy.

The giant rested his head on his hand and thought long and earnestly. When he aroused it was abruptly, and he arose from his chair.

"I mustn't think on it; it is madness. She would never take notice o' sech a man ez me. She's far above me, an' I'm not only a poor miner, but rough, clumsy an' uneducated."

Hesitating for a moment, he went to the locked chest, took out a book, and began to read and think. He found the task of educating himself a difficult one, for he had a poor basis upon which to begin, and lacked practical means of advancement.

Yet, he did not allow himself to be discouraged.

He was thus engaged when Alfred Lovering entered, and the announcement that Silver-Plated Sol wished to see him was enough to end studying at once and take him from the cabin.

Lovering led the way at once to the edifice where he had left Sol, and the two set about getting the information they desired in regard to Danforth.

Their questioning was done so skillfully that Dave did not suspect the object, and it ended in complete success.

They learned that Danforth was interested in Lois Orme, and Dave gave the general impression of Bowlder Bar—he said that the two were engaged.

Not deeming it prudent to ask too much of him, they dwelt but a short time on the subject, and conversation drifted into other channels.

Sol did not mention his late adventure, and Bond had no intimation of the storm that was gathering. Neither did he suspect that he had given information calculated to bring Danforth to grief. Had he done so, he certainly

would not have said anything against Ettala's brother.

At the end of an hour Lovering accompanied him back to his cabin, a promise having first been gained that he would not mention that he had seen Sol. At the time he gave it, he did not remember that he had promised Ettala to find the rover.

Another hour passed before Lovering rejoined Sol. When he came, his expression was that of a victor.

"Good luck?" questioned the rover.

"Rather, I should say. We have our enemies on the hip."

"What have you learned?"

"This: both Joe Danforth and Lois Orme were absent from Bowlder Bar at the time Roger Hillard was killed."

"Excellent. Did they go together?"

"No, and, of course, they would not be so foolish as that. The girl left, and returned, by stage; Danforth went with his private outfit, horseback."

"Events begin to wheel into line," said Colton, in a hard voice. "We are meeting with the usual reward of perseverance, and Roger Hillard's murder will be avenged. I will spend a year, if necessary, to gain what proof we need. This female, this Lois Orme, must be a fiend."

Lovering did not answer at once.

"Can it be she is guilty?" he finally asked.

"How can it be otherwise?"

"Your question is a hard one to answer, but I would rather have it otherwise. Perhaps Danforth had some other accomplice."

"Nonsense! Why should he take another, and that one a woman? No, we have the right parties, and it only remains to connect them with the tragedy."

"I have considerable curiosity to see this Lois Orme."

"So have I, and, with your permission, we will do so. It is now fully dark, and we can safely venture out if we use due caution—and it is only a matter of time when I show Danforth & Co. that I escaped the fate to which they doomed me. We can go to the house where Dave tells us she lives, and if luck is on our side, we can see her and remain unseen ourselves."

"Done!"

They prepared for the expedition, and Sol pulled the wide brim of his hat down over his eyes as a partial disguise.

When they reached the street, few persons were abroad. Bowlder Bar was not a town where people delighted in making night hideous. There was a degree of dissipation and objectionable doings, but all was quietly done; even such men as Mose Devlin usually kept shady when on the street.

The village was small and it was not a long walk to Shaw's house—the home of Lois Orme. They soon neared the place. Unknown to them, all was favorable for their venture. Shaw and his family were visiting at the further side of the village, and Lois was alone in the house.

When they arrived, they saw that only one room showed a light. As luck would have it, it was not only a rear one, but the window was slightly raised at the bottom, and they could safely investigate.

Sol pushed aside the curtain and looked in.

Lois sat beside the table, engaged in sewing. Her whole attention was on her work, but her thoughtful expression indicated that her mind was elsewhere.

Seeing her, the rover forgot the object of his visit, and gazed with admiration. She was a beautiful girl, and he was enough like the majority of his sex to realize the fact. Her stature was above the average, her form well-rounded and perfect of contour, and her face one to challenge the admiration of a stoic.

Silver-Plated Sol looked, motionless, until Lovering became impatient and put him away with gentle force.

Then he took his place.

What thoughts were in Lovering's mind no one could say. He saw the girl who had been Abram Selden's adopted daughter; who was accused of having stolen his wealth. We have once seen Lovering claim to be a Selden heir. If such be the case, he must be Lois's enemy, but he gave no sign of such a fact then. He looked as earnestly—more so, if possible—as Sol had done.

When he turned, the two men looked at each other in silence for several seconds. It was Sol who spoke first.

"She don't look like a murderer."

"No," the elder man admitted.

"Can it be we have made a mistake?"

Colton hesitated, and then he remembered Roger Hillard and the indications that connected the girl with the crime.

"No; it is impossible. In yonder room is the fiend who drove the fatal knife into Hillard's back!"

Lovering shivered and did not reply, and at that moment their attention was arrested by the closing of a door in the house.

Sol again applied his face to the place of observation.

Lois, aroused by the sound of the door, was looking toward that of the room in which she sat, and, plainly, expecting to see the Shaws return.

The door opened and a man appeared on the threshold, but it was not Mr. Shaw.

It was Mose Devlin, the pugilist!

Lois sprung to her feet. She recognized the man who had molested her and Ettala not long before, and she had learned to fear him as she would a wolf. Plainly, he was not now in a mood less dangerous, for there was a flush on his evil face which told that he had been drinking deeply, and men in such a condition lose all control over themselves.

He advanced a pace and put out one hand in a friendly way, however.

"Don't be skeered, young woman," he said. "I hev come with ther olive branch in my hand, an' ef I've got a whisky-bottle in my pocket, that don't count. I'm here as a delegate ter ther peace conference, I be; though I'm generally a bad man with a hole in my boot, an' when I go out fur ter paint ther town red, she gets painted a reg'lar scarlet. Them is my sentiments, but, ez I afore observed, I'm now hyar ez a milk-sop o' ther first water. Don't be afeerd!"

Despite this reassuring speech, Lois looked troubled. She was of a naturally courageous nature, as we have seen before, but there is only one way to deal with a drunken brute—to beat him with the very weapons he proposes to use."

"Have you business with Mr. Shaw?" she asked, in a reasonably firm voice.

"Not prezacly. My business is with you, solely, only, singly an' onely. It is summut o' an honor fur you, fur I'm Mose Devlin, the pugilist, an' I'm a bad man with a hole in my boot; but I know you are a *ne plus ultra*, e pluribus unum, ter express it in Choctaw, an' I reckon we kin git along salubrious. I hev been a-trainin' with Joe Danforth, but talents like mine ain't ter be hid under a bushel, an' I've now come out ez an independent candidate an' propose ter play a lone hand."

"I am busy now, but if you'll call again, I will see you," Lois answered, trying to think of some way to git rid of the ruffian.

"Put away yer other business an' attend ter me," said Mose, with a flourish of his hand. "It's seldom you see sech a man ez I be, an' you don't want ter slight him when ye do. I offer ye my full assistance, an' it is rightful that you should hev some good pard. Thar is danger afoot fur you, an' them ez is interested in the Selden an' Hillard cases will find me a mighty dangerous rock ter run against. Ef you don't take me, they'll make it hot fur you!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOOD FOR THE FLAMES.

MOSE DEVLIN had not long been in the room before both Silver-Plated Sol and Lovering were watching. They stood side by side and gazed at the ill-assorted pair inside, but not a word passed between them.

Their chances for observation were admirable. The window was partially raised and the curtain entirely down; they could look past it without much danger of discovery.

Sol Colton had grown deeply interested in the scene occurring inside. His mind had persisted in ignoring the dark facts of the case ever since he first saw Lois; perhaps we should say his heart had vanquished his head; and his sympathies were all with her when he saw what a visitor she had.

Devlin's last words, however, had served to suddenly interest both watchers, and they listened with additional care.

"You are interfering with what don't concern you," said Lois, haughtily.

Devlin waved one hand as though he were a Fourth-of-July orator.

"When murder has been did, all men are interested," he said. "Roger Hillard has been killed, an' I know why it was done. It was ter enable you ter hold ther Selden money!"

"It is false!" Lois exclaimed.

"Tell that ter ther marines! Gal, I'm an old bird, an' I've got big wings. You can't fool me. I've got outer this racket, an' I mean ter feather my own nest. I ain't goin' ter stand back out o' sight an' let Joe Danforth take all ther plums; not I. I'm goin' ter be a chief in ther case, an' your right-hand man."

"Never!"

"Don't be so sure."

"I will have nothing to do with you."

"An' I say you will."

"If you are a friend of Joseph Danforth, you had better go back to him and let him take care of you. I do not want such acquaintances, and I command you to leave the house. If you decline, I will call for help."

"Do it!" Devlin loudly retorted. "Do it, if you dar'! Jest call in ther neighbors, an' you'll find out ther kind o' a man I be. Ef pushed ter ther wall, I'm a bad man with a hole in my boot. Call in help, an' I'll say ter them: Hyar is Bertha Wardner, who is wanted in Illinois for stealin' twenty thousand dollars, an' Joe Danforth is her accomplice, rightfully named Charles Winter; an' they killed Roger Hillard ter keep him from tellin' ther heirs o' Abram

Selden who they was, an' whar they was. That's what I'll tell, an' when I does it, I reckon ther walls o' Babylon will rock!"

The pugilist poured forth this speech rapidly, his voice and face expressive of all the evil that was in his nature. He was like an awkward and ugly demon, exulting in his power, and no stage ruffian ever approached him.

Lois heard, and her consternation was apparent. She leaned against the table, resting one hand there as though for support, and her face was white.

The watchers at the window heard with mixed emotion. All their suspicions were receiving confirmation, and they could no longer doubt, but, despite all, they pitied the girl. The battle was unequal, and Devlin was not a man to inspire sympathy in any case.

Sol felt a strong desire to walk in, take him by the neck, and fling him out of the house.

Lois made an effort to recover her self-possession.

"You are a coward!" she exclaimed.

"Thank you, my dear!"

"If I was a man, I would punish you as you deserve."

"Ef you was a man, you would do jest what you'll do now; treat with me ter presarve ther peace. Nobody wants sech dang'rous secrets ez I hold ter be noised abroad. Now, see hyar; let us talk sense. I hev been Joe Danforth's man, but he ain't jest ter my liking, an' ez you be, I want ter make a change o' base. Gal, I'm in love with you. You hev inspired in my manly breast a perfect gale o' tender passion. Ef I could knit my fortunes ter yours, I'd be a happy man. Tharfore, I have a proposition ter make."

"I do not care to hear it."

"Why not?"

"No matter; enough that I do not."

"It ain't enough," said Mose, with an ugly look. "I come hyar to make a proposition o' marriage, an' I'm goin' ter make it. Ez I before said, I love ye. Now, will you desart Joe Danforth, gather up ther twenty thousand dollars ye hev, an' flee with me?"

Lois recoiled.

"I will not!" she exclaimed.

"Think ag'in."

"It's unnecessary; I positively refuse."

"Then, do ye know what I'll do?"

"No."

"I'll go out on ther street an' shout ter all that you are Bertha Wardner, an' that Danforth is Charles Winter, an' that Hillard was murdered ter keep your secret safe!"

"The coward!" muttered Silver-Plated Sol, clinching his hands.

"Danforth is not Charles Winter," Lois declared.

"I say he is."

"It is false!"

"See hyar, I ain't no child!" Devlin declared. "I know what I'm talkin' about, an' you know I kin ruin you by tellin' people ther facts o' ther case. But I don't want ter do that; ez I before said, I am yer lover, good an' true, an' I've come ter elope with yer ter-night. So, jest put on yer outside gear, an' we'll take a skip, money an' all, an' be see'd no more 'round hyar."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," said Lois, firmly.

"Then I'll take you."

"I refuse to go."

Continued opposition had aroused the pugilist's ugly temper to its highest pitch, and he could no longer control it. Had he been sober he would never have ventured there, anyway, but as it was he had no sense of prudence. He had drank liquor and planned, and as a result he had resolved to have Lois as his wife. That the money she was supposed to possess had had a large part in influencing him was clear, but she pleased him, anyway.

He believed he had wooed her, this night, as a woman should be wooed, and when he saw the utter failure of his attempt, he resolved to push matters to a crisis. He had no arrangements made for abducting her, yet he decided to do it at once.

He sprung forward to seize her, but she ran around the table and avoided him. Her gaze was on the door leading to the outside, but he was shrewd enough to suspect her design, and he blocked her retreat in that direction, so she took the only course open to her.

One other door was near her—that one which led to the stairway—and she opened it and darted through.

Devlin followed, shouting a profane threat.

"By George! I can't stand this!" exclaimed Colton. "I'll take a hand in the game and break every bone in that ruffian's body."

The threat was worse than his intention, but his indignation was great, and the pugilist was not likely to receive tender usage at his hands.

As he spoke the rover sprung through the open window. One moment his steps rung on the floor, and then he disappeared in the same course the others had taken before him.

Lovering was about to follow when he discovered something which would have been seen before by all had they been less interested. The smell of smoke caused him to look upward, and

then he perceived little tongues of flame lapping the roof all along the edge of the eaves.

The upper part of the house was on fire.

"Zounds! I reckon they'll find a hot region up there!" he exclaimed; and then he crawled through the window and prepared to help his friend as much as possible.

He had hardly touched the floor, however, before there was a tremendous crash overhead, the whole house shook, and the ceiling of the room changed shape, while plastering rattled down freely.

No explanation of the cause was needed; the roof had fallen in. Shabbily built at first, the fire had eaten steadily there before making itself felt elsewhere, and it had not needed a great deal to undermine the frail top.

Lovering ran to the door, which had closed with a slam when the shock came, and tried to push it open.

It was a vain attempt; it was immovable.

He flung his whole weight against it.

Another failure was scored.

He realized that some of the timbers must have fallen in such a way that it was barred, and as there was no sound to indicate that those who had gone up-stairs were moving, he was seized with a sudden fear.

Perhaps they had been beaten down by the falling roof and were perishing there.

With an exclamation of horror he ran to the window and leaped out. As he did so, some heavy object descended, and he looked by the now bright light to see what it was.

He recognized Mose Devlin. The pugilist staggered to his feet, and Lovering saw that his face was blackened and bleeding.

"Where are the others?" the elder man asked, quickly.

"Dead, I reckon; I don't know!" gasped Mose, as he reeled away, his face toward Mac's saloon.

Lovering did not stop him. He knew the fellow had had a narrow escape from death, and that he was then nearly fainting, and he let him go.

Shouts were beginning to be heard, which showed that others had discovered the fire, but Lovering looked up at the blazing roof with a hopeless face.

"Great Heavens! they will be too late!"

Once more he crawled through the window and attacked the door, but without success. He assailed it with a chair, but his weapon broke and the door remained firm. Then he dashed out again, shouting for help.

He had practically lost his head.

But what of Lois and Sol?

When the former ran up the stairs she found the air thick with smoke, but she underrated the importance of the affair in her fear of Devlin and kept on.

Sol, too, followed, for he was not to be turned back by the flames, but just as he reached the floor the roof fell, and then he was beaten down by timbers which pinned him tightly to the heated boards.

CHAPTER XXV.

A WOMAN'S HAND.

SOL did not fail to realize his danger, and he made an effort to throw off the timbers. Failure rewarded the effort. The roof had come down in such a way that he was tightly bound, and the timbers formed a network. One, which was the key to the whole situation, and which, if removed, would have saved him, was beyond his reach; he saw that, after an effort to get at it.

Once more he put forth all his strength to raise the mass as a whole, but it was in vain.

Heat and smoke were beginning to overcome him. His flesh seemed blistering, and his breath was drawn with difficulty.

He realized his danger, and a man less brave would have despaired, but he was not of that character. He turned his gaze toward the stairs, hoping to see Lovering appear, but he did not come.

"By George! I reckon it's my last case!" thought the rover. "I've pulled through many a close corner, but—"

Suddenly a light form darted to his side.

It was Lois.

He had lost sight of both her and Devlin, but she appeared through the smoke and paused at his side. More than that, she caught at the timbers and essayed to move them.

"Not there!" said Sol, hastily. "Take the smaller one; it is what holds all the rest. There!—that's right—there it goes!"

She had removed the key to the situation, which had blocked all the others, and then he put forth his strength and flung off the whole.

Freed, he sprung to his feet, but heat and flames were thick about him, and he gasped for breath like a dying man. He saw Lois stagger and realized that she was giving way entirely.

But he was again the cool, brave man who had gone through many dangers, and he was never more self-possessed than then. He caught Lois in his arms and made for the stairway. Smoke and fire seemed to follow them, but he ran the gantlet bravely and hurried down.

A heavy timber blocked the door, but he flung it aside and staggered out into the sit-

ting-room. From there it was but a short journey to the open air.

He rushed out just as Lovering was calling for help, and the latter caught Lois in his arms.

Silver-Plated Sol breathed the fresh air in great gasps, but each breath gave him new strength and he knew he was not injured.

"Thank God! Thank God!" uttered Lovering.

Lois aroused. She, too, was recovering rapidly, and she made a successful effort to keep her feet. The miners were hurrying to the spot to fight the flames, and Sol, Lois and Lovering retired somewhat.

"I trust you're not badly injured, miss," said the rover, who still gave Lois his support.

"Not in the least, except that the smoke and heat nearly overcame me. I shall be all right in a moment, but I owe my life to you. But for you I should have perished there, and I thank you with my whole heart!"

"Ah! but you owe me no more than I owe you. I was a fast prisoner under the timbers, and I should have died there if you hadn't come to the rescue. You showed a nerve few women possess, and you shall find Sol Colton is not an ungrateful man."

He was temporarily forgetting that she was the woman he had but so lately declared he would hunt down, and he did feel that he would risk his life at any and all times for her. Gratitude was one of his chief characteristics, and she had saved him from burning in the house.

"We will try to decide who is the debtor at another time," said Lois, managing to smile.

"It's ten to one we can't agree on that point, but I hope we shall quarrel in no other way."

"I don't think we shall. At any rate, I hope to see you again. Here are my friends, the owners of the house, and as they are in doubt as to my fate, I will go to them. Let me hope you will not fail to see me again."

"That I will not; I'll call on you very soon."

And then Lois hurried away to join the Shaws, who had returned just in time to see their house going to ruin.

"She's a queen of women!" said Colton, looking after her admiringly.

"She is indeed," said Lovering.

"And as brave as she is bewitching. Zounds! you should have seen how gallantly she came to my rescue. No cowardly heart there, pard, but true steel from the core. I've been saved by a woman's hand, but it was as heroic as that of any man. She might have fled and left me, but she remained like the heroine she is!"

"Do you forget who she is?"

"Who she is?"

"She is Bertha Wardner, and—and—Well, you remember Roger Hillard!"

Sol did remember, and his enthusiasm received a check as from a dash of ice-water. In the excitement of the occasion he had forgotten everything but the events of the hour. But he remembered now, and the brightness of his face faded out.

"She is the woman we must hunt down," said Lovering, looking at him steadily.

The rover did not answer.

"The murderer of Roger Hillard!" the elder man added.

"Did I deny it?" irritably asked Colton.

"I thought you were forgetting it."

"I never forget—and that's why I remember that I ought not to stand here where every one will see me. I'm off for our cabin. Good-night!"

Lovering would have said he was ready to accompany him, but no chance was given him. The rover hurried away, and he made no stop until he was in the cabin. Then he removed all traces of smoke, lit his pipe, sat down and began to smoke furiously.

"Hunt her down?" he thought. "Hunt down the woman who saved my life at danger of her own! Never! I am not such a base wretch. And yet—yet—I have sworn to avenge Hillard's death. What in thunder shall I do? I am on the horns of a dilemma!"

Day again.

Only ruins remained of the Shaw house. The fire, which had caught from a stove-pipe, had gained too much headway when discovered to be checked, and efforts had chiefly been directed to saving those which surrounded it. In this respect the people had been wholly successful.

The family thus made homeless had easily found quarters elsewhere, but Mr. Shaw was already talking of rebuilding.

Lovering had looked for Mose Devlin, but that person was nowhere to be found.

The forenoon passed without events of importance, but a storm was gathering, as Ettala soon found to her cost. A coldness had grown up between her and her brother, which was something more than that on her part.

Until she knew that he had not done harm to Silver-Plated Sol, she could not see him without a shiver of terror; she could not forget the man under the floor and subsequent developments.

After the office was closed, however, he informed her that he wished to speak to her.

She heard him with a presentiment of coming evil, for she remembered the scene at Giant Dave's cabin, in which Luke Burbank figured.

"Ettala," said Joseph, abruptly, "isn't it about time for you to marry?"

"Two o'clock? Well, I don't know—"

"Nonsense! Be serious. I mean, are you not old enough?"

"I am two years younger than you."

"That is no criterion. Girls marry at an earlier age than men. You certainly seem old enough."

"I see that you want to get rid of me."

"Now, you know better than that, for you are a good, true sister," said Joseph, effusively. "But marriage is the lot of all people, and as it comes sooner or later, it behooves a girl to keep her eyes open and let no chance slip which will be to her advantage."

"Where are the gray hairs that accompany this wisdom?" asked Ettala, who was desperately trying to pass the matter off as a jest.

"Now, in your case," immovably pursued Joseph, "I have been spoken to by an excellent man who has plenty of money. He wants you for a wife, and I do not see that you can do better."

"What price will he pay for me?"

"What price?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"It seems I am to be bought and sold, irrespective of my own wishes, and I suppose I am to be put up on a block, like the old-time slaves, and sold in due order. Who is ambitious to be my master?"

"Ettala, this levity is unbecoming and unjust. No one wishes to become your 'master,' nor would I sell you, as you express it. The gentleman who seeks your hand is Luke Burbank!"

It was no surprise to the girl.

"The gambler?" she coolly questioned.

"Ettala!"

"What now?"

"Why will you repeat this unjust calumny, which people make against an honorable man? Luke Burbank is not a gambler, and those who affirm it lack all proof. He is a gentleman in the fullest sense of the word."

"Then, may I never see another gentleman! I consider Burbank a mean, low fellow; too mean for an honorable person to speak to. Wait!—hear me through! I have always regretted that you saw fit to associate with such a person, and, of late, I have learned enough to completely condemn him. I wonder at his impudence in making such a proposal after what has occurred; I even wonder that he dares look at me!"

Ettala was thoroughly in earnest; her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled brightly.

"I suppose you refer to the affair at Bond's cabin," said Joseph, in a disagreeable tone.

"Yes, I do."

"I would not speak of it if I were you. After having disgraced yourself so, you are lucky if respectable people—"

"Stop, Joseph Danforth!" the girl cried. "You, like Luke Burbank, are vile enough to dare insult me, but if you were ten times my own brother I would not bear it. You should be my defender, but as you are not, I will, if necessary, arm myself with a revolver for protection. Then, I'll shoot whoever insults me!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

WARNED TO LEAVE.

DANFORTH was not too obtuse to see that he had ventured on dangerous ground, and he hastened to make enough of an apology to partially satisfy Ettala.

"You have not explained why you visited Dave Bond, but I will let that drop if you do not go there again. He is too low a fellow for you to ever speak to."

"He is a gentleman!" the girl declared.

"Great heavens! what a comparison! A low, awkward, homely, uneducated lubber—"

"You have said quite enough, Joseph. Our quarrel is becoming disgraceful, and I think the sooner we end the interview the better. Your insult to Mr. Bond is uncalled for, but of no consequence. As for Luke Burbank, I will not have him for my friend, and I advise you to take the same stand. It may save you from trouble in the future."

"You are as venomous as an adder," Joseph bitterly interrupted, "but do not think I am ignorant of the cause. You are in love with this Dave Bond."

"Well, isn't that my privilege?" the girl haughtily demanded, then her feelings underwent another change. "Joseph, I can bear this no longer. Our quarrel is, as I said before, disgraceful, and I decline to talk further."

She arose and was leaving the room, but he called after her:

"And I shall tell Burbank—"

"That he can bestow the honor of his preference on any woman in the wide world except me!"

And then she was gone.

Joseph remained for some time in bitter thought. He knew his sister well enough to be sure it would be a difficult task to move her, but in some way it must be done. He knew Burbank was not worthy of her; he knew the man was not only a gambler, but crooked in

almost every way; but he held a secret over his head, by which he could ruin him if he saw fit.

The blow must be averted. The price of safety was Ettala's hand, and Joseph was resolved that she should marry Luke. He had experienced a rebuff, but he was not one to easily give up a project, and he expected to in some way turn the scale and bring victory out of the jaws of defeat.

It must be done.

He soon left the house and found Burbank. The latter was not in an amiable mood, for his throat was sore from the grip of Giant Dave's hand, and on the surface were blue spots which he did not care to expose in public.

A very mad man was the person who had tried to play the bully in the presence of Dave Bond.

Danforth proceeded to give a summary of his fruitless effort to convince Ettala against her will, and Luke sat in silence through all, savagely gnawing his mustache.

"One thing is certain," he said, when the story was told; "our first step must be to get rid of Bond."

"Not to kill him?" said Joseph, with a shiver.

"Why not?"

"My soul is sick with so much slaughter."

"Perhaps you're right," said Burbank, moodily. "Usually I should laugh at your scruples, but I am in a weak mood to-day. I—but never mind. Bond throttled me, and nearly tore out my windpipe, but I am willing to overlook it if he will leave the town. You must call on him and order him away."

Joseph sat aghast. He began to see what a mill-stone was about his neck. Holding the sword over his head, Burbank called on him to do all the unpleasant work, and he dared not refuse.

So, on the present occasion, he could not decline to carry out the plan his confederate laid, and when Luke said it was time to move, he obediently arose and walked toward Dave's cabin.

His visit was so timely that he found the miner in, and on seeing that it was Ettala's brother, he greeted him cordially. Joseph, however, did not become enthusiastic. He approached his main subject with reluctance, dwelling on minor events for awhile, but finally plunged ahead desperately.

"I've come to talk about my sister, Bond."

"Hev ye?"

Dave thought that he was to be thanked for his service, but he did not consider it necessary. Ettala had done that, and one word from her was worth a dozen from Joseph.

"Yes. It seems there was trouble here, the other night."

"Yas; she wasn't well used."

"As well as she deserved, I believe, though I do not wish to speak harshly of her. I want to have a frank talk with you, Bond. Ettala is a young and foolish girl, and, unlike men, women have to live until they are gray-headed to get much wisdom. Now, my sister, though she means well, is as foolish as the rest of her sex, and she has seen fit to fall in love with you!"

Giant Dave started. The statement was a complete surprise to him. He knew the state of his own feelings toward Miss Danforth, but that she could really care for him he had not suspected. Joseph had made a serious mistake in his choice of words, but as he was carefully not avoiding Dave's gaze, he did even then dis-cover it.

"Now, I have no fault to find with you," Danforth continued, "but your own good sense must show you that there is a great difference in your worldly station, and Ettala's. She is educated, refined and rich; you are unlearned, rough and poor. It would not be right for her to throw away all her prospects in life for you."

"It would be foolish," Dave agreed, sadly.

"Consequently," said Danforth, brightening, "you will see that I am right when I ask you to leave Bowlder Bar."

"Leave hyar?"

"Yes."

"Why should I do this?"

"To be beyond Ettala's sight, so that she may forget her foolish love for you."

Giant Dave was silent. As much as he had been surprised at the assertion that the girl loved him, he did not think of doubting the statement when it came from her brother. He was astonished, but he had seen other strange things during his life, and there was no reason why this should not be true.

Mature thought would have made him doubt, but, just then, while he acknowledged the truth of Joseph's assertion that they were ill-mated, he thought it was hard that he should be obliged to leave a treasure he had never gone so far as to possess in reality.

"I hope she don't blame me," he said, with such simple ingenuousness that even Danforth was affected.

"There is no one that blames you," he said.

"Did she say she wanted me ter keep away from her in ther future?" he slowly asked.

"No, no; I am the practical person."

Dave revolved the matter in his mind. In some respects he was quick-witted, but, where human hearts and loves were concerned, he was inexperienced and slow, and he did not yet see why he ought to leave Bowlder Bar.

Joseph watched him curiously, and then grew impatient at the delay.

"While you are here of course her mind will run in the same channel, and she will be bewitched over you, but women are fickle, and when you're out of sight, you'll be out of mind. See?"

"No, I don't," Dave admitted. "Ef one person cares fur another, they don't forget so easy. Ag'in, I've got regular work hyar, an' ef I go away, that's no knowin' what sile I'll strike. O' course, I ain't goin' ter bother her, an' I kin stay in the Bar an' not do any harm."

"That won't answer," said Danforth, sharply, mistaking a simple argument for cunning double-dealing. "You must leave town, and that's the end of it. You have made yourself disagreeable to other people here—you abused Mr. Burbank in a way few men would forgive—and are getting a reputation as a quarrelsome, fighting fellow. Such a man is no fit mate for my sister, and I won't have you near her. The question is, will you leave the Bar quietly, or will you wait and be driven out?"

Danforth had spoiled his own case; not by abusing the patient miner, for that the latter was accustomed to; but by speaking as he did of Burbank. Those few words opened Dave's eyes; if his wits had moved slowly before, they no longer did so; and his broad shoulders were thrown back as he looked squarely in his companion's face.

"Do I understand you ez speakin' in favor o' Burbank?"

"He is an excellent man and my friend," said Joseph, and then he regretted the words very promptly.

"Then I refuse ter leave town."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it is clear to me that your sister needs a protector. O' course she hez told you how Burbank abused her, an' ther fact that you ain't flogged him fur it proves that that is a screw loose somewhere. Ef you forget your duty ez a brother enough ter take Burbank's part, then Ettala needs another protector, an' I'll stay!"

Dave spoke with a decision not to be mistaken, and Danforth became white with anger.

"Beware!" he said, hoarsely. "Don't forget that I am one of the leading men of the town, and don't defy me."

"I don't defy you," was the mild reply, "an' I don't want any trouble; but I reckon Montana is free ter all men, an' I'll stay hyar fur a while longer."

"Then you stay at your peril!"

"Peril o' what?"

"No matter. Enough that if you don't go quietly, you will be compelled to go."

"How will you do it?"

All of Dave's resolution was moving. He did not come of a family easy to drive, and the idea of being sent out of Bowlder Bar like an outlawed criminal, aroused him so that he forgot his habit of reserve and was ready to dispute the matter inch by inch.

"Perhaps you think we can't, but we will find a way—"

"Who is 'we'? Do ye mean Burbank?"

"I'm able to speak for myself, and I say that if you continue obstinate I'll make your life here one which you won't care to live. You've got to go, and that's the end of it. Mark that down! That's all I've got to say now, but if you ain't gone in two days, I'll be after you!"

He had arisen, and at the last word strode abruptly from the cabin, leaving Dave alone. The latter looked after him thoughtfully.

"What next? I'm Dave Buzzard, an' I can't escape ther family luck. Why don't they let me alone? I hev kept ter myself, but it don't seem ter do any good. Hev I got ter figh?!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CAVE-DWELLER SECURES A PRIZE.

SAM LEACH, the survivor of the two men who had robbed the stage, still remained in his cave in the mountains and plotted mischief against Hamed, the Magician. That was all he did do toward getting satisfaction, for he had learned that Hamed seldom went out, and he lacked the boldness to befriend the Magician in his den.

His suspicion that Bill Wild's death lay at Hamed's door, formed though it was on frail evidence, never wavered, and he was fixed in his resolution to sooner or later "get square" with him.

He brooded over the matter in his cave, where life was beginning to be rather monotonous. He could have done very well had he been able to get what he desired to eat, but as he had little but what his gun supplied him, and that without seasoning, he was not only getting disgusted but angry.

Various plans, some of which were wild and impossible, had been considered for taking revenge on Hamed, but he did not know how to

get at a man who lived in a house like a castle and seldom, or never, went outside.

Still, he held to his purpose like a red Indian.

On the night of the fire he went to bed as usual, and slept soundly until some time after the fire. Toward morning, however, he awoke with a feeling that all was not well. He was under the impression that, in the neutral ground between slumber-land and real life, he had heard suspicious sounds in the cave, and when fully awake he reached over and gathered up his rifle.

Then he listened.

No sound was audible, save the gentle voice of the wind ou'side the cave, and several minutes passed uneventfully. He had no matches, and his fire, which he kept barely alive all the time, was at the further side of the cave in a niche among the rocks.

To reach it he would have to run the gauntlet of an intruder, if there was one, and he might be a grizzly bear.

But as the minutes passed on and nothing further occurred, Sam grew reassured and decided that he had been foolishly disturbed. No doubt, his impression of trouble was but the lingering shadow of a dream.

So he laid down again, closed his eyes and was soon fast asleep.

His slumber was but a brief one, however; he soon awoke again, and this time in a manner which settled all doubt about there being trouble. He dreamed that he was in some tropical country, and was being strangled and crushed by a huge serpent, and when he awoke he could still feel the pressure. There was a weight upon his chest, and a compression of his neck which almost deprived him of breath, and when he struggled he was unable to throw off the incubus.

All this might be a nightmare, but Sam knew he was awake, and he took a practical view of the case.

The pressure on his neck was caused by the hands of a man; the weight on his chest arose from the same source.

He was being systematically strangled.

Luckily for him, he possessed both strength and "sand," and as he realized his danger, he made a desperate effort to throw off the unknown. Nor was it fruitless. Over went the strangler, though his hold did not relax, and then ensued a desperate fight in the dark.

Sam had no means of knowing what his opponent thought, but on his own part he took the view that he was fighting for life, and he made the battle a lusty one.

Not a word was spoken, but with hands and arms busy, they rolled about like tops.

For a while they seemed very evenly matched, but, after a few minutes, Sam felt his enemy's strength begin to fail, and by a great effort he turned him over on his back and then assumed the same position the unknown had held at the beginning of the fight.

"I've got ye now!" he grated, between his teeth.

"I never 'll yield ter a Chinaman!" the unknown retorted, as he squirmed in vain.

"You'll yield ter me, though, fur I've got ye fast," Sam asserted.

"Ther Chinese must go!"

"Durn yer rubbish! talk sense, will you? Who be you, anyhow, an' what're ye arter me fur?"

"Your name is Dennis!"

Sam was so incensed at this, that he proceeded to bump his prisoner's head on the hard ground of the cave, and when he had administered this correction, there was no further motion from the unknown.

"None o' yer shammin'; you can't fool me," Sam said, stubbornly.

There was no answer, and all his efforts failed to extract one, and as a last resort he dragged his man back to the rear where he had kept his fire. He felt the need of light on what seemed decidedly a dark subject.

No resistance was offered, and he soon had his man back to the desired point. Then he proceeded to stir up the fire and get a torch going. This was the labor of some time, but the stranger laid still and the torch was blazing after awhile.

Sam held it close to his prisoner.

"A nigger, by thunder! No, he ain't; I reckon he's a mulatter, or—or—What is he?"

It was little wonder Sam was perplexed. The man was white in some places and black in others, and it was not until the victor had made a further examination that he understood the cause.

"Ther black is smoke, or burnt cork, or suthin' o' that sort. Should say ther feller had been in a fire, an' got ther wu'st on't. Strikes me I hev see'd him afore, an' I'll git off ther soot an' try ter diskiver."

He produced some water and washed away the disfiguring marks with the exception of some blisters, which would only yield to time.

"Yas, I've see'd him at ther village. I heerd his name, too. Lemme see; what was it? Daniels, Dudley—no, it was Mose Devlin; an' he's ther feller that claims ter be a pugilist. Wal, I reckon he's got inter a fight that was

too much fur him. Reckon he was out o' his head when he was talkin' about ther Chinese; jest ez likely, too, ther critter didn't know what he was doin' when he tried ter strangle me. I knocked him insensible when I pounded his head; I'll see what he does when he comes to, ag'in."

He had some time to wait. The man was, indeed, the redoubtable pugilist, who had fared badly in the fire at Shaw's. He had lost his head, for the time, and wandered away to the mountain. He knew of the cave and had taken refuge there, but for all of his doings since he was in the burning house, he was wholly irresponsible.

His chances for recovery from his injury would have been much better had he been in the hands of a doctor; he had received severe injury, and it was hard to tell how it would go. Properly cared for he would undoubtedly recover; neglected, it was a neck-and-neck race between life and death.

Sam improvised thongs from the hide of a slain animal and tied his wrists, for he did not care to risk his life again at his hands, and then waited patiently for him to regain consciousness.

He was rewarded at last; Devlin moved uneasily, and then opened his eyes and looked around.

"Wal, pard, how is it?" Sam encouragingly asked.

"I'm a bad man with a hole in my boot," said Mose, feebly.

"Possible? Wal, that's all right, but you ain't on a t'ar now, be ye?"

"I'm goin' out ter paint ther town red."

"Ef you ain't painted, then I'm a fool. Come down ter solid hoss-sense, an' be agreeable. How d'ye feel?"

"Like a shamrock."

"You look like a played-out leopard, though time 'll change yer spots. What've ye been doin'? Been in a fire?"

"It was a hoss-race," Mose explained.

"Oh! you go an' hang yerself!" Sam advised. "What I want is ther bottom facts o' ther case. Be you goin' ter oblige me, or ain't you?"

Evidently Mose was not, for he continued to talk wholly at random, and Leach was not long in discovering that his body and mind were no longer working in pairs. Devlin had no more idea what he was doing than he had of the number of the stars.

Realizing this, Sam took mature thought. What was he going to do with his uninvited visitor? He had not come in a way of which Sam could approve, nor did he want him. Should he drive him out, or not?

Plainly, Devlin was a sick man and liable to soon wind up his earthly career, and as Sam noticed his muscular build and rugged face, he agreed that it was too bad.

Consequently, he decided to take the man under his protection, and try to pull him through the crisis. If he could be saved, some good might come of it.

Then Sam went about his duties as physician, and proceeded to make his patient as comfortable as possible. Devlin soon fell asleep, but not peacefully. He moved restlessly, muttered, and lived over in fancy some of the late exciting scenes in his life.

Leach did not fail to make use of his unconscious words, and as he listened his face grew eager and his attention close and unflagging. Important secrets were being betrayed to him, and he chuckled now and then as he realized the power which was being put in his hands.

"This yer is what I call a windfall!" he muttered. "With sech secrets in my hands I reckon I sha'n't need ter stay shet up hyar like a hermit. I kin go ter Bowlder Bar an' blossom out ez a full-grown sport, an' Mister Joseph Danforth will find it ter his interest ter protect me. I've got ther earth! But, which side shall I go with! Danforth will pay me ter keep quiet, but ther other side'll pay me ter talk. I must sound 'em both, an' see what's in 'em."

It was with the good will of an expectant heir that Sam cared for his patient after that. All his prospects had changed, and, like the majority of men, he was able to bear good luck cheerfully.

But Mose Devlin, rolling on the bed of pine boughs, muttered his dangerous secrets over and over again, and hovered on the line of the trail which leads to the unknown grounds of futurity.

He seemed likely to never again be able to "paint the town red."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

KIDNAPPED.

LOIS ORME did not suffer any ill-effects from her adventure in the fire. She had received no injury, except that her lungs were slightly affected by smoke, and her nature was too strong for her to be nervously prostrated.

Consequently, she felt nearly as well as ever on the following day.

Ettala called upon her at an early hour, at her new home, and matters assumed their old form. Lois would have been contented had it not been for that one shadow of her life which had darkened the last two years. At times she

half-decided to leave Bowlder Bar and escape the peril which she knew menaced her, but she was of a nature not readily inclined to yield, and she made no real move toward going.

Shortly after dark, that evening, she received a note by a Chinese messenger which she proceeded to open and read. It was as follows:

"MY DEAR LOIS:—I want to see you at once, on important business. I have heard something new and odd, which you will be pleased to hear, and I can tell you a good deal better here than anywhere else. Please come over at once, for I am alone this evening. ETTALA."

There was nothing surprising about the note, for they often wrote thus, though Ettala was of such an impulsive nature that she usually waited for nothing when she had news to reveal; and Lois at once prepared to obey the call.

As none of the family were at hand, and she did not expect to remain long, she said nothing about her destination, but quickly left the house.

She found the streets dark and still. At that hour the greater part of the miners were at supper, and it was the quietest part of the whole time during which the citizens were actually astir.

We have said the streets were dark. Only those who have lived, or been, in small places not artificially lighted can understand fully what that means in a cloudy night, but when she was once away from the house, only the occasional dull lights from windows of other houses served as guides.

Still, she had no thought of danger, and she walked briskly along toward the post-office.

Her pace was not long continued, however. As she was passing one of the small cabins, a man sprung out and clasped her in his arms, while at the same moment one of his hands closed over her mouth.

She started violently, filled with sudden fear, but his hold was not to be broken. Against such strong arms her strength availed but little, and the odds were speedily made greater by the coming of a second man.

She endeavored to call for aid, to ask for mercy, but the strong grasp over her mouth prevented any utterance.

Then she was hurried away, half-led, half-carried. Her abductors first passed behind the line of cabins, where there was little danger of meeting any one, and then they went on toward the western part of the town.

The girl's mind was filled with the darkest forebodings. Who were her captors, and what was their object? She knew she had enemies, but she had not expected them to make themselves known in such a way.

What was she to expect?

They passed the village and reached Madrock Ledge. As they began to ascend a suspicion crossed her mind. Her chief captor was partially behind her, but she glanced at the other. Dimly seen in the darkness, his figure had the peculiar outline of a Chinaman's.

Her suspicion was confirmed.

They ascended the ledge, but paused at the door of Hamed's house. The Chinaman unlocked the door, and then Lois made a last effort to liberate herself. It was in vain; the hold upon her seemed to be of iron; and she was forced across the threshold. The door closed behind them, and she was a prisoner in the Magician's lair.

The place was dark and silent, but Sing-So soon struck a light, and then Lois was released. The man who had lately held her let drop the long coat he had worn, and cast off his slouch hat, and Hamed stood revealed.

For a moment there was silence. Lois looked at the Magician indignantly, but he was proof against all that, and a smile slowly curled his lips.

"Welcome home!" he said.

"Coward!" the girl exclaimed.

"Call me father," he suggested, coolly.

"Never! I deeply regret that nature has placed me so that I must believe it, but the name shall never pass my lips in form of recognition."

"Still obstinate and revengeful!"

"What would you have?"

"Obedience."

"You will wait for it a long time. You lost all claim on me, years ago, when you deserted me and my unfortunate mother, and I am not inclined to renew the bond. You have clearly revealed your hand, and I despise you."

"Talk on, if you will, but be sure you do not lay up food for future misery. You are not in a position to reject friends, and, say what you will, there is no friend better than a father. I had good reasons for leaving Illinois when I did; reasons which I may one day explain to you; and now I am anxious for your welfare and success. More than that, I am powerful, and by my aid you can escape all the plots of your enemies. Put your trust in me, and you need fear nothing."

"I decline!" Lois declared.

"You are hasty."

"And what of yourself? What do you call this abduction?"

"I call it a means of bringing you to your

senses, and of saving you from your enemies; the former, because you would not listen to the voice of reason where you were; the latter, because your enemies are closing in and you must soon have been captured."

"What of that? I have done no wrong."

"Perhaps you could convince them."

"I could, at least, bear the result."

"You are still obstinate and foolish. Lois, let it cease. I am your father, and I am older than you. I have the practical wisdom of years which have made me gray. Is this nothing? I do not claim to have a deep love for you, for we have been long apart, but the voice of nature is speaking; you remind me of your mother, and I would be your earnest defender. Think seriously before you reject my aid, for a strong hand is never to be despised."

Hamed spoke with an earnestness which told that he was, at least, anxious to carry his point, and Lois did hesitate. Was it wise to reject the proffered aid? She was a woman, and, practically, alone in the world. It is not easy for one thus situated to fight her battles alone. That she needed a strong hand was clear; that she knew not where else to look for one was true.

But what of Hamed? From the first she had disliked him. Her instincts told her he was not a man to be trusted or given honor. Added to this was the recollection of a father who had deserted his infant daughter, and his wife, without known cause.

Was such a man to be trusted now?

Her whole reason said No; but it also occurred to her that it might not be wise to be too precipitate. She was at present in the Magician's power, and there was no knowing what might be the result of angering him.

"What do you advise?" she asked, slowly.

"That you leave Bowlder Bar and danger behind you, at once."

"And go where?"

"That is immaterial. Montana is broad, and, beyond it, stretches the whole West and the British Possessions. I advise you to take the money Abram Selden left you and find a new home."

"Abram Selden left me no money."

"But you secured it," he answered, with a crafty smile.

"You persist in making the same accusation—"

"I make none whatever. You did right in taking the money. Selden intended to leave it to you, and the fact that no will was produced does not alter the facts of the case."

"We need not argue that," said Lois, whose face was flushed with indignation, "for I again repeat that I never had one dollar of the missing money. I do not know what became of it."

"Why do you persist in this denial?" he demanded, with a harshness of which he was, perhaps, unconscious. "The whole world knows you took it, and I say you did right. More than that, I advise you to put it in my hands, and I will safely guard that and you."

Lois's queenly figure was drawn to its full height, and she looked at him with eyes which blazed with scorn.

"Your anxiety concerning the miserable money betrays you completely," she said. "Your sudden interest in me arises from the fact that you are anxious to secure the money for yourself. I thank you for thus exposing yourself, for my way is now clear. I decline all alliance with you; I decline your aid; and as my resolution is irrevocable, it is just as well that conversation should end here!"

The Magician stood mute and dumfounded before this arraignment. There was that in the girl's voice which told that her purpose was, indeed, irrevocable, and a sullen flush of anger arose to his usually placid face.

"Girl, you shall repent this!" he hissed.

"That may be, but I shall not yield."

"You shall yield, and that, too, completely. You are in my power, and I will hold you fast until you change your mind. This place shall be your prison. Those who notice your disappearance will not think of looking to Madrock Ledge, and you shall be immured like a nun until your will is broken. I have prepared for this, and all is ready."

"Beware how you restrict my liberty!" said Lois, in an unsteady voice. "I may not prove so friendless as you think, and I know the miners well enough to be sure that, if the matter comes to their attention, they will hang you to the nearest tree."

A slight shade crossed the Magician's face, for he knew there was truth in what she said.

"I will venture it, at any rate," he said, after a slight hesitation, though with no wavering of his purpose. "Sing-So, lead the way!"

The Chinaman took up the lamp and opened a door which seemed to lead to the upper part of the house, and then Lois was conducted to her prison.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DECoyed.

By eight o'clock, the following morning, it was generally known that Lois Orme was missing. Some efforts had been made to find her the previous evening, but there had been no

good result, and when morning found her still absent, people decided that she was not likely to reappear.

The fact affected the people in different ways. Silver-Plated Sol and Lovering, hearing the news, decided that she had taken the alarm and fled to prevent arrest.

Those who did not know she had been in danger of arrest feared harm had come to her. The attack of Mose Devlin had not been forgotten, and it was just as well for that person that he was not then in Bowlder Bar.

Some search was made for her, but it was not rigid enough to turn the attention of the searchers to Hamed's house; it was the general opinion that she was not near the town.

No one was more perplexed than Joseph Danforth, and he was glad when Burbank called at the office. The latter's expression showed that he had heard of the disappearance, and he opened conversation abruptly.

"An awkward turn of affairs, ain't it?"

"I should say so," gloomily answered Joseph. "What is your theory?"

"I can't say that I have one. It is all a mystery."

"Yet there are ways to account for it."

"Certainly."

"She may have become afraid of discovery by the Selden heirs, and left on that account."

"Yes."

"It is hard, after all I've risked and done, to be robbed of the reward I deserve for my efforts."

"Do you regard the battle as lost?"

"How can I tell?" was the irritable reply. "In this wild country a person stands a good chance of being able to hide forever, if he, or she, sees fit. Search may reveal her whereabouts, but I am doubtful."

"Well, I came over to help you out of your dilemma. I have learned the identity of the strange man who figured at the fire the other night."

"Who was it?"

"Silver-Plated Sol."

"Who?" Joseph asked, with a start.

"The man whom we consigned to Mad river."

"Do you mean that he escaped?"

"I suppose he must have done so, for he is alive. Our little game was a complete failure. Colton seems to bear a charmed life, and I happen to know he is now hiding in a cabin at the other side of the village."

"Great heavens!"

"Don't put it so strongly."

"But, ruin stares me in the face. You have yourself said this Colton was a shrewd, bold and dangerous man, and as he knows who put him in the river, he will strike back, of course. Even the fact that he is keeping out of sight now proves that he has some cunning move in mind."

"Not necessarily. It may indicate that he is at a loss just how to strike back. He knows as well as you do that you are one of Bowlder Bar's foremost men, and it is not easy for an unknown sport to come into a town and get at such a man. Position and wealth weigh a good deal, all the way from New York city to wild Montana."

"I hope you are right. But, hold on! You said you had a theory in regard to Lois. I catch your meaning; you think Sol Colton has got her away."

"Not so; I see the work of another hand, Mose Devlin's!"

"Mose Devlin's!"

"Yes. I have always noticed that your pugilistic ally had a predilection for feathering his own nest, and now his work is clear. His attempt on the night of the fire proved in which way his mind ran, though we then supposed it was only one of his drunken games. Now, I see evidence of treachery. He knows the importance you attach to her, and, on second attempt, has succeeded in abducting her. Mose means to finger the Selden shekels, himself. He may have her concealed in a cave, now, or he may have taken her to Dismal Diggins, Quartz Rock or Lone Claim—or to any of the other adjoining towns. But, let us drop that for now; if we are not sharp enough to outwit the pugilist, we ought to lose. Let us speak of Silver-Plated Sol. We have acknowledged that he is a dangerous man, and should be forever silenced as soon as possible."

"We don't seem able to do it."

"Trust me for that. I have a new plan. Being a skillful penman, I am going to write a decoy letter and lure him away from the village. This done, we will be on hand to settle his case in the twinkling of an eye. Give me pen and paper, and I'll show you my skill."

Silver-Plated Sol was alone in the cabin where he was temporarily making his quarters. Lovering was out seeking for information. The afternoon was warm and Sol had fallen into a doze. When he awoke, a soiled and folded sheet of note-paper was lying at his elbow.

He picked it up lazily, for he did not at once suspect that it was of importance, but at first

glance his gaze rested on his name, written in a straggling hand.

He unfolded it with sudden interest. The interior showed more writing in the same hand, which, when combined with bad spelling, was not easy to read, but he made it out after awhile.

It was as follows:

"SILVER-PLATED SAUL:—You may know by these presents that I am in posession ov news ov importance, iff you are a mind ter use it. Beleevin', ou ter bee a man o' cense, i give you ther furst chansse. Ez i happen ter no where Louis Orrum is, i may ez wal say i am on ther make, an' i shall sell my secret ter ther hiest bider. She can't git out until i see fit, an' i sha'n't see fit till i git sum money out ov it. This will tell you i am playin' a loan hand, an' goin' fur ther earth, an' money maiks ther mayor go. Ef you want ter treet with me, an' no all about Louis, cum ter ther Seven pinz at 5 (five) this p. m., afternoon. But iff you don't cair, i'll carrie my pigs to another markit. i meen biznis. "JUDAS IS CARRAT."

It required a second reading before, deciphering the wretched scrawl as slowly as he had, Sol fully comprehended what was meant, but the fact then became evident that some one claimed to know where Lois was; in fact, to have her confined somewhere; and he intended to make all the money out of it that he could.

Two ideas were in Sol's mind. One was that the letter was a decoy, intended to lure him into some new danger. He did not believe this to be a fact, but, like a wise man, he realized that things were not always what they seemed, and it was well to look out for such dangers.

His real theory was that Mose Devlin was the author of the letter! The signature—"Judas Is Carrot"—told nothing, though it had a suspicious sound; but the letter was one which an illiterate person like the pugilist might have framed.

Plainly, it was written by some one who knew the inside history of his visit to Bowlder Bar, and that one must be either Devlin or Joseph Danforth—or, possibly, Burbank.

"Well, I'm going to make a test case of it, anyhow. I'll go to the Seven Pines, and that will settle the whole affair. I wish Lovering was here, but, as he isn't, I'll leave a note for him and then journey north. If there's a trap for me, I may possibly learn the trapper to keep to himself in the future."

So saying, he wrote a note to Lovering, looked to his silver-plated revolvers and left the cabin.

The Seven Pines was a locality no one could miss who had been long in Bowlder Bar. The tall, green-topped trees stood in a group on the side of Rattlesnake Ridge, making one of the most prominent landmarks in the vicinity.

Sol walked briskly toward them, but he was soon in a wild and rocky region, where rapid progress was impossible, and it was not until the end of an hour that he approached the immediate vicinity.

It was the wildest of all the Bowlder Bar region; a place no one cared to visit without a motive more than usually strong; for even an experienced mountain-man would grow weary climbing the difficult way.

The Seven Pines grew on a ridge, but as it was a hard task to get to them, Sol did not suppose his correspondent would be found at their base, and he directed his steps toward the gulch which lay at the west side.

No one was visible, and he paused and looked around for whoever had invited him there.

He had not long to wait.

A rough, ragged fellow emerged from behind a rock and advanced with what seemed a friendly grin.

"Hyar we be, ez ther cockroach said ter ther bed-bug," he cheerfully observed. "I'm pleased ter see you did not undervalue ther importance o' ther communication I had ther honor ter send ter you."

"By which I suppose you are 'Judas Is Carrot'?"

"That's my name, pard, an' I hope you've come with business in yer eye."

"Well, I'm always ready to listen in a good cause, and I shouldn't have taken all this climb if I hadn't had a motive. People say only fools and villains journey to Rattlesnake Ridge, and I begin to believe it. It's a hard road to travel."

While Sol spoke he kept a close watch for danger. If it was a trap, no better place could be wished for. The rocks furnished hiding-places for any number of men, and he had no intention of being taken unawares.

"Ha! ha! you're a funny dog!" said Judas.

"When I was at college, I graduated number two among the wits, but as horse-sense is more needed here, suppose we come right down ter bed-rock. State your business, and I'll listen."

Sol did not deem it prudent to get on too friendly footing with the ragged man, who seemed to be a vagabond in the fullest sense of the word, if not a villain.

Judas was evidently willing to oblige, and he cleared his throat with a loud sound, but, just as he commenced to speak, Sol experienced a sensation as though one of the Seven Pines had fallen over and hit him on the head, and then he dropped unconscious to the ground.

CHAPTER XXX.

GRIZZLIES' BRIDGE.

WHEN the rover recovered his senses the population of the gulch had increased. He at once remembered the scene preceding his downfall, and as he hurriedly opened his eyes he saw two men before him.

One was his ragged-looking acquaintance; the other, a man very much like him in appearance.

"Ah!" said Judas, "friend Solomon opens his eyes ag'in. How goes it, pard?"

The rover had tried to sit up, but found his wrists bound together behind him, and it needed no explanation to convince him that he had, indeed, fallen into a trap. He looked keenly at the two men, but their faces did not seem familiar, and he was at a loss to know to whom he owed his troubles. In the meanwhile, he did not get needlessly alarmed about it.

"I'm feeling tolerably well," he answered; "so well, in fact, that there is no necessity for strings on my arms. If you'll cast 'em off, I'll walk around and take the knots out of my legs."

Judas chuckled gleefully.

"No you won't, old man; not ter-day. We're runnin' this hyar circus, an' we prefar ter hev you ez you be."

"Why the blazes have you tied me up?"

"I shall be happy ter explain. We hev a grudge ag'in you, an' you was decoyed hyar on purpose fur this. We arranged it all cutely, an' while I chinned with you down hyar, my pard stood at ther top o' ther gulch an' dropped a bag o' sand down on yer head. We thought at first it had knocked ther life out o' you, but you seem ter hev a tough head, an' you've come out on't like a man!"

Sol had been carefully using his eyes during this speech.

"Your explanation needs explaining. What grudge have you against me?"

"That's our business, an' we ain't goin' ter tell all we know."

"You might as well, for your secret is not half so iron-plated as you think it is. I know you both! I defy your companion to speak—to let me hear his voice!"

He looked at the second man, who promptly averted his gaze.

"He's deaf an' dumb," said Judas, hurriedly.

"Oh! And are you lame and blind?"

"I'm not so blind ez some I know."

"Well, gentlemen, I must admit you got the best of me in this game, nor will I try to account for my failure to keep out of the trap. However, as I said before, I know you both—Burbank and Danforth are your names!"

Judas laughed in what he tried to make an amused way.

"You're 'way off, thar! I don't know them you mention, an' I don't want ter. We're able ter manage our own affairs, an' we are goin' ter do it. Zach, we'll help him up!"

They did so, and then he was marched up the gulch between them. He made no effort to resist, for he knew it would be folly. He must bear whatever they had in store for him, unless some chance interfered in his behalf. That they meant to kill him seemed probable, but he had faced many dangers before and gone through them all right; it would not be advisable to despair while life was left.

Despite the denial of his charge, he had no doubt but his captors were Burbank and Danforth. True, their disguises were good, but his eyes were keen. The former, a man of the world in the fullest sense of the word, carried out the manners of his disguise in good form; but Joseph lacked confidence, as Sol had suspected when he challenged him to speak.

At the end of ten minutes they paused. They had gained higher ground, though still below the level of the Seven Pines, and were standing on the edge of a narrow canyon.

"Look!" said Judas, or Burbank, as we may as well call him. "Here you see a log which spans ther canyon. That piece o' wood is ter play an important part in yer career. Ef you was ter look close you'd see it was curiously scratched. That was done by ther claws o' grizzly b'ars. It is a bridge by which all sorts o' animals cross ther canyon. In this wild region ye can find about anything in ther quadruped line that Montana boasts on, an' over this log they go, day an' night. Ther most celebrated travelers is b'ars, an' from ther frequency with which they p'rambulate, it is called Grizzlies' Bridge."

"You seem well informed on natural history," Sol observed, hiding his arising uneasiness.

"You'll think so before mornin'!" chuckled Burbank, still clinging to his dialect. "Now, we'll show you what we kin do."

And they proceeded to do so.

A quantity of ropes were produced from a niche in the rocks, and Burbank set to work with the ease and confidence of one who has tried the same thing before, but as there was a good deal of work to be done, at least half an hour was consumed before all was finished. When it was done, this was the situation:

The banks of the canyon were wooded, and, in some places trees projected huge branches

nearly across the cleft. From one of these branches Sol was suspended, by means of a rope tied around his waist. But this rope was only a small part of the elaborate plan.

His position was horizontal; he might be said to be lying face downward, but held in air by the rope; and to each wrist and foot an additional rope was tied, they being then drawn to the banks of the canyon until his position was that of a spread-eagle. The ropes proceeding from his wrists and hands were tied to trees on the banks, and were the main features of this elaborate idea, but the one tied about his waist had a purpose, as Burbank, dropping his dialect, proceeded to explain.

"You are now nicely arranged, my dear Colton," he said, "and in a position to enjoy the society of the grizzlies. You will observe that you are about the hight of a full-grown bear when he stands up and waves his arms like a campaign orator. The purpose of this is clear. When the grizzlies know you are here they will desire to make your acquaintance by eating you. This they will do ultimately, but not at once."

"In other words, I am to be the second course, I suppose," suggested Sol, coolly.

"Standing on the log they will try to reach you," continued Burbank, unheeding the interruption, "but you are hung so high it will not be easy. When the largest stands erect, he will barely be able to touch you with his paws, and he will probably play foot-ball with you. To make the case certain and keep you from instant death, the rope around your waist was added. This keeps you from sagging down, and Old Eph, unable to get you in his grip, will probably cut you to shreds with his claws."

"I think I catch your idea fully," Sol said, as coolly as ever, though far from being pleased with the prospect. "You are to be congratulated on having arranged all so elaborately, and the world thereby secures another brilliant genius of the inventive order."

"I am glad you like it."

"I like it so well that I shall know how to deal with you when I am out of the fix," the rover said, in a tense voice.

"Do you expect to get out?"

"I certainly do."

"You'll find yourself infernally mistaken. The grizzlies will cut you to pieces."

"Not if I know it. I was never born to die that way; boots off and feet in bed is to be my lot when I go over the divide. I'm going through this, and when I get out I'll make it so hot for you that brass buttons will melt."

Burbank did not answer, and the shadow of a doubt was on his face. He hated Silver-Plated Sol and wanted him out of the way, but he also wanted him to feel his position and know he had been playing with fire before he went. But was it wise? A chance had saved him from death in Mad river; might not another chance save him from the grizzlies?

The rover was some distance above his companions, but, looking down, he could see their faces, and he was discerning enough to read what was passing in Burbank's mind.

He saw that he must change the drift of events.

"Now, here is Danforth," he added; "he knows better than to leave me here. He's a coward, is Joseph; and it would make him shake in his boots, day by day, if he thought I was on his trail."

"It's a lie!" declared Danforth, breaking silence. "I fear no man. If you can get out of this you are at liberty to do it. I defy you! Come, partner, let's go."

He addressed Burbank, and the latter aroused from thought and prepared to depart. A few more taunting remarks were addressed to their victim, and then they retreated to the bank of the canyon and started for Bowlder Bar.

Silver-Plated Sol was alone, and in a most novel and uncomfortable position. Thus far, it was not painful, for his weight was so distributed that it was little felt, the rope about his body bearing the greater part, but he knew that it would not long be agreeable.

Above him waved the branches of the trees. The limb to which extended the rope around his waist was a huge one, and capable of bearing five times his weight. Had his arms been free he might almost have touched it, but, as it was, he might as well, or better, have been twenty feet distant.

Looking down, he had a less pleasant view. He was directly over the huge log—Grizzlies' Bridge—but, below it, yawned the depths of the canyon, with a rocky bed far below.

He realized the fact that he was in extreme danger. As has before been said, the vicinity was one to which men seldom came. No dwellings were to be found for a long distance; he might shout himself hoarse and gain no relief.

What, then, would be the end?

Burbank had said he would fall victim to grizzlies, or other wild beasts. If he escaped them, he would have to endure physical pain both from his position and from want of food and drink.

How long could he endure this? Clearly, not for any great length of time, and the prospect was one which would have made a weaker man's

heart quail. Sol, however, remained cool and resolute, though far from being at his ease.

Perhaps twenty minutes had passed after the departure of his enemies when the case assumed a new form. A slight sound at one side caused him to look around, and he saw a grizzly step upon the log.

The hour of danger was at hand!

CHAPTER XXXI.

TROUBLE FOR GIANT DAVE.

THE following morning Jason Bunker, owner of the Eighteen-Carat Mine, was seated in his office when Joseph Danforth entered. The latter looked as though he had not slept well, and the smile on his face seemed forced, but he managed to talk lightly and cheerfully and current events were duly discussed.

Joseph, however, had come with a fixed purpose, and he was not long in working around to the subject.

"I have called to ask a favor of you, Mr. Bunker," he said, carelessly.

"Consider it granted," Bunker at once answered.

He was one of the rich men of Bowlder Bar, and, in his own opinion, he was one of the great men. He also ranked Joseph as one of these lucky few, and as he had begun to have political ambitions, he regarded his visitor as a man whose friendship and support were invaluable.

Being of a weak, none-too-scrupulous nature, he would do anything for such a man.

"Thank you, sir; I thought I could depend on you," said the postmaster, much pleased. "The foremost men of the Bar ought to hold together."

"Decidedly so, Mr. Danforth."

"That's my theory," said Joseph, craftily, "and when you want aid from me you have only to ask for it."

Having said this he knew it would be hard for Bunker to refuse, and he at once added:

"In plain words, my dear sir, you have a man in your employ whom I wish numbered among the ex-inhabitants of Bowlder Bar, and to that end I have come to ask you to discharge him. He is an eye-sore and scourge to me."

"It isn't Superintendent Alvord?"

"Oh! no; Alvord is a gentleman."

"The man leaves my employ to-night then. Who is he?"

"His name is David Bond!"

Bunker's face had fallen perceptibly.

"Dave Bond!"

"Yes. You don't seem pleased, Mr. Bunker."

"I confess I am not. Bond is my most valuable hand, next to Alvord, and the latter's especial favorite. He is a quiet, peaceable fellow. What can he have done to worry you?"

"He is not as peaceable as you think. Outside the mine he is a noisy, quarrelsome fellow, and he has insulted and assaulted my friend, Burbank. Worse than that, he has bewitched my sister, and I would not see her tied to such an ignorant, brutal fellow for a cool million. Yet, the only hope is to get him away. Ettala one moment declares she loves him, and, the next, weeps and says she is terribly afraid of him, begging my protection."

Joseph spoke with an energy which showed that he was fully in earnest, and Bunker knew the only way was to fall into line and oblige him.

It was no slight favor to do, for men so valuable as Giant Dave were not easy to find, but he must sacrifice him to secure Danforth's future aid.

"Say no more, friend Joseph; I'll do anything for one I esteem as highly as I do you; and though I shall probably never find so valuable a man as Bond again, this day is his last at the Eighteen-Carat. I'll set him adrift."

The postmaster had really never doubted his ability to influence Bunker, but he was so pleased that he shook his hand and thanked him warmly.

He remained for half an hour later and enlarged on Dave's alleged offense, and then, when he deemed the nail driven to the head, took his departure and went to report to Burbank that their plot was succeeding well.

Bunker, however, was not so well pleased. Left alone, he rubbed his chin ruefully and stared at vacancy as though grappling with an abstruse problem.

"Don't like the case at all!" he muttered.

"Bond is the best laborer I ever had, and it's money out of my pocket to let him go. What is Danforth's object? I don't believe his explanation in the least, and I reckon it's all a covered game. Again, I'm sure Alvord will object strongly. Bond is a favorite of his; he has even hinted that he ought to be promoted; and he will do more than hint that he ought not to be discharged. Yet, Bond must go; I want Danforth's influence when I go into politics, and a common miner shall not stand in the way."

Nevertheless, it was with an awkward air that he that afternoon accosted Alvord, his superintendent.

"This is pay-night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is the money all right?"

"It is all in the desk, Mr. Bunker."

"Very well; you may tell Dave Bond, tonight, that we don't want him any longer."

"What?" ejaculated the astonished superintendent.

Bunker repeated his statement.

"Discharge Bond—our best man? For what reason?"

"Because I see fit to dispense with his services," sharply answered the mine-owner. "I am tired of seeing that mountain of flesh around; set him adrift, I say."

"Haven't you a definite reason to give, sir?"

"Isn't it reason enough that I don't want him?" demanded Bunker, growing angry, as men will when they feel that their cause is not good. "I reckon I am the owner of the Eighteen-Carat, Mr. Alvord."

The superintendent mildly suggested that, as such, he ought to study the best interests of the mine, but Bunker had worked himself up to a point where he would not listen to reason even if he dared to, and the subject was soon dropped.

Alvord resumed work, but Bunker, watching him, perceived that his views did not change, and both men saw the hour for paying draw near with uncomfortable feelings.

It came at last, and, according to the system at the Eighteen-Carat, the superintendent prepared to pay, while Bunker sat by and watched.

The miners came toward the office in a body. They had finished a day's work and were eager to handle their money, and as a discharge had not occurred for months, no one anticipated anything of the kind then.

As chance would have it, David Bond was third in the line which then formed. His face wore an unusually light expression, for, while he was once a spendthrift, he had been saving his earnings judiciously of late, and it was his ambition to some day be more than a common miner.

When he approached the desk Alvord handed him his pay, but without meeting his gaze as usual.

"I am directed to say that you will not be needed at the mine any longer," the superintendent observed.

"Eh?" said Giant Dave, while the money naturally dropped from his hand.

The unwelcome statement was repeated.

"Do ye mean I'm discharged?" Dave slowly asked.

"Yes; that's the amount of it," nervously admitted Alvord.

"Discharged! Wal, I didn't think that," said the giant, his troubled gaze wandering to Bunker and back to Alvord. "I don't justly understand. What've I did outer ther way?"

"I have no fault to find, but we are unable to give you work any longer."

The superintendent made a secret gesture, which he hoped would have the effect of sending the miner away, but the latter was not accustomed to that way of getting an idea, and he did not move.

The line of miners behind him stood still, all staring blankly at the unexpected announcement.

"I've tried ter do my duty in all cases," Dave slowly said, as though scanning the past, "an' I s'posed from ther fact that no fault had been found with me that I was gittin' along all right."

"I have told you I have no fault whatever to find," kindly answered Alvord.

"Men ain't usually discharged without a reason. Mebbe if you was ter tell me wharin I've failed, it'd help me in ther futur."

Bunker had been listening with growing anger. He knew he was wrong and hated Bond for questioning his decision, and his pent-up passion now broke loose.

"Confound you!" he shouted, arising from his chair, "it is none of your business why you are discharged; this is not an intelligence office. It's enough that I don't want you, and, what's more, I won't have you. You've got your pay, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Dave, meekly.

"Then get out of this office! You are no longer in my employ, and if I find you hanging around I'll have you arrested. Clear out, at once!"

The color deepened in Dave's face and he opened his lips to speak, but, after a visible struggle, he closed them again and went slowly out. He was not a weak man, but the loss of his situation was a serious one; it was the first he had held since his effort to live as a man should live, and he had felt until now that fortune was rewarding him. At one blow, however, he had fallen from his position.

As the passage of a vessel disturbs the water around it, so his discharge spread further than had been expected, however. He had often been rallied by his associates, and some of them considered him a man without nerve, but, despite that, they had liked him, and there were sullen faces and wondering whispers along the line which followed him.

He would have gone at once to his cabin, but the other men stopped him and a long conversation followed. Bunker saw it when he came

out, and started to order the crowd to disperse, but he thought better of it and returned at once to the village.

Not so Superintendent Alvord. He liked Giant Dave and was indignant at his discharge, and he had resolved to speak to the men about it. His position with Bunker was one for which he no longer cared, since he had money of his own, and he had decided to risk it in behalf of the miner.

As a result, he had a talk with the miners, and, despite the fact that Dave opposed the decision at which they soon arrived, a plan was formed by which they proposed to show Bunker that he had made a mistake in assailing an honest man without cause.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BUNKER'S BOOMERANG.

JOSEPH DANFORTH congratulated himself that his scheme had been a perfect success. He had not failed to learn whether Bunker kept his word, and when he knew that Dave Bond was really discharged, he felt at ease on that point. Doubtless the fellow would soon wander away from Bowlder Bar and disappear entirely from view.

On other points the postmaster was less at ease. Lois Orme was strangely missing, and there were unpleasant investigations in regard to the Red Summit affair.

His mind wandered persistently to the man they had left on the mountain. Was Silver-Plated Sol still alive, or had he succumbed to the tax on his system and died of fatigue? Or, as Burbank suggested, had he died at the hands of the grizzlies?

The originator of the scheme had expressed the belief that the animals would endeavor to get at him both from the log and from the limb, and, succeeding, tear him to pieces. Yet, he might escape all these dangers.

Danforth's mind hovered on the subject despite all his efforts to forget it. At times he had a vision of a still, lifeless body suspended in mid-air; again, he thought of grim and horrible grizzlies fighting over a feast of human flesh, and shivered.

Despite all his hardihood, there was something about the affair which was too horrible for his coolness.

At times the guilty man thought of fleeing forever from the Bar and those who knew him, but a magnet held him to the point of danger. He had steeped his soul in sin for Lois Orme, and he was resolved to win her if such a thing was possible.

If Luke Burbank was troubled by remorse, he gave no sign. He pursued the even tenor of his way, and one would have thought his conscience was wholly at ease. Really, he was playing a deeper game than even Danforth knew, and he meant to snatch victory from the jaws of danger, to change an old expression.

The following day was an important one in the history of Bowlder Bar.

Mr. Bunker, owner of the Eighteen-Carat Mine, had just sat down to his abundant breakfast when a messenger arrived and said there was trouble at the mine, and that he was wanted by Mr. Alvord.

He put on his hat and hastened that way, wondering if an accident had occurred. He did not want any miners killed, for he owned the houses in which the greater part of them lived, and it would make a difference in his receipts when rent-day again arrived.

When he reached the Eighteen-Carat, he found the men collected in a group, with Alvord standing a little at one side.

"What's the matter?" he abruptly asked.

"It's a strike," the superintendent calmly said.

"A strike!"

"Yes."

"For more pay? This is the first I've heard of it."

One of the foremost men stepped forward, removed his hat and faced his employer. He was a stout man with a face which, if not very intelligent, was firm and impressive, and he was well fitted to be the spokesman.

"It ain't fur more pay, Mr. Bunker," he said.

"No? What then?"

"We hev discussed ther matter, an' we want ter see Dave Bond at work with us ag'in."

"You never will see him at work again!" hotly declared the mine-owner.

"Then we don't go ter work ag'in ourselves," firmly, but calmly, replied the other.

"You infernal villain! do you think you can dictate to me?"

"It'll be jest ez wal ter use fair words," said the miner, a momentary gleam in his eyes. "But that ain't hyar nur that. What we want ter speak on is ther strike. It has been brought about by your dischargin' Dave Bond without a reason. We don't approve on't—"

"What in perdition do I care whether you approve of it or not?" shouted Bunker.

"You may care a good deal, for not a stroke o' work will we do till Dave is put back at his post."

A short silence followed. Bunker was angry and excited; the miner-spokesman cool and determined. Alvord watched with secret amuse-

ment. He believed Bunker would give way, and he was anticipating much from seeing the man humbled.

Bunker, however, had no intention of yielding. He was a stubborn fellow at all times, and the idea that his men should dare to dictate to him, aroused all his anger. He resolved to beat them if work was never resumed in the Eighteen-Carat.

"I reckon I own this mine," he finally said, "and I propose to run it. I will not submit to dictation from any one, and those who try it will have cause for repentance. You are at liberty to work or play, as you see fit, but I warn you that you can never resume except on my terms. Dave Bond is forever done with this mine!"

"Are you willin' ther mine should lay idle?" Jones asked, argumentatively.

"Until I can get new men—yes!"

"Miners ain't plenty, right 'round hyar."

"That's my business, not yours. I'm not going to be bullied by you or your fellows, and you can consult your own wishes. Bond shall never do another day's work here, and if you see fit to hang off, you can do so."

"You hev already heerd our decision, but it don't seem ter me you should be willin' ter shet up ther mine jest ter keep Dave out. He's a good an' faithful man, an'—"

"That'll do; you have said enough so that I see that you hang together, but it will be all the worse for you. I am going to run this matter myself, and I wish to remind you that it will be a bad affair for you in the end. Two-thirds of you are married men; three fourths of you live in houses and cabins owned by me. Unless you go to work at noon, every one of you can look for quarters elsewhere; not a man can sleep under a roof owned by me tonight unless he goes to work!"

There was a deep silence after this assertion. None of the strikers had considered the possibility of such a thing as that; in their vigorous defense of Giant Dave they had forgotten the hold Bunker had upon them.

Facilities for building were not good in Bowlder Bar, and there were no vacant houses, nor could they be erected readily. Bunker had furnished house-room for nearly all his men, and it was clear that if he drove them out, great inconvenience, to say the least, would result.

His threat caused a momentary wavering, but the indignation of the miners quickly arose and they declared as one that they were not to be beaten thus.

"So be it," Bunker answered. "I am not going to stay here and talk to you, but you can do as you see fit. Bear one thing in mind, however; unless you resume work before the day ends, every man leaves my dwellings tonight. This is my ultimatum."

He wheeled, bestowed a scowling glance upon Mr. Alvord, and then strode toward the village.

He was in an extremely ugly mood. He did not like the idea of closing the mine, even temporarily, and he saw that his unjust attack on Giant Dave was recoiling on him, boomerang fashion, but he was ugly and stubborn when he undertook to do a thing, and he was resolved to fight the matter out.

Unless the strikers yielded, he would expel all from their houses, and to those who had families this was no slight matter.

He left the miners in a mood far from being contented, for they had expected him to yield to their demands, and the probable sequence of the affair bade fair to leave them not only out of work but homeless.

Alvord was disappointed and chagrined. As has been said, he was so situated that he could afford to defy Bunker, and his position was not a necessary thing, but with the miners it was different.

With their own interests at stake, he now advised them to submit and go to work. They had done what they could for Dave Bond, but it was not wise to sacrifice themselves when they could not aid him.

All this he explained, but it was not easy to quell the storm he had raised. Bunker had never been a favorite, and they now took the ground that they were ill-used, and declared that they would persist and cripple him, even if they suffered privations themselves in doing it.

Some of them even went so far as to say that if he brought new men to open the Eighteen-Carat, they would not allow them to work.

The true strikers' spirit was rampant.

But, before they dispersed, Giant Dave himself appeared on the scene.

"I've heerd what you've said, boyees," he observed, mildly, "an' I've come ter ask you ter change your minds. Tain't right you should sacrifice yourselves fur me, an' I advise you ter go right ter work an' lose no more time."

"That is best," Alvord agreed.

"No, it ain't" said Jones, sturdily. "Ef we war in ther wrong, or ef old Bunker could find a word o' fault with Dave, we should hev nothin' more ter say; but, ez 'tis, we're goin' ter stick ter our colors an' either make or break."

And to this resolution they remained true. Giant Dave was visibly affected by their devotion, but he still kept their interests at heart, and it was not until he had exhausted all his arguments that he abandoned the effort to make them drop his case and resume work.

The day passed slowly on, but not a stroke of work was done in the mine. Bunker kept watch, and when he saw that the strikers were, indeed, firm, he prepared to keep his threat and expel them from their houses.

Unluckily, he found plenty of self-styled sympathizers. These were men who were his rivals in mining, and who would be glad to see the Eighteen-Carat closed. From enemies they became suddenly transformed to supporters, and, anxious to help the quarrel on, they announced that Bunker could rely on them in the emergency.

And Bunker prepared for the eviction.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ALONE WITH THE GRIZZLIES.

BUNKER did not have any trouble in gathering a force of men to assist him in his work. There are always men to be found who, too lazy to work, are ready to assist zealously in any such enterprise, and these he took under his wing and formed as a party of eviction.

Then they went out on their mission.

The miners were at home and expecting the visit, and they had made up their minds to bear it philosophically. To resist would be to array themselves against the law, such as existed in Bowlder Bar, and the people in general would be sure to side against them.

Clearly they must go, and then wait for some turn in the tide which would give them what they considered their rights.

Bunker went to work and the clearing-out process began. It was conducted in a way which made the miners more than ever indignant, but they scarcely spoke a word as they were themselves first ordered out and then followed by their goods.

The posse under Bunker's lead were, at least, earning whatever pay they received.

A dismal scene was soon presented, as house after house was emptied and the furniture and other goods piled up in front of it, and some of Bunker's supporters began to wonder if he was doing wisely. Quiet as the miners were, they might yet strike back.

An unexpected episode occurred as Bunker was directing the emptying of one house. A light figure suddenly came to his side, and he looked down and saw Ettala Danforth.

"Jason Bunker, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" she impulsively said.

"Had I?" muttered the mine-owner, confused by the unexpected assertion.

"Yes, you had! What right have you to turn all these people out of doors? This family are my friends, and they do not know where they will sleep to-night. For shame! to make such use of your power!"

"They've chosen their own road; I've nothing to do with it," he sullenly replied.

"You have everything to do with it. You are driving honest people out of their homes."

"These houses are for my workingmen; I won't have a lot of loafers in them. When my force refused to work longer, they forfeited all right to them."

"Your excuse is no excuse at all. You are acting out of a mean spirit of revenge, and I say you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Ettala looked very pretty as she stood there with her cheeks flushed with indignation, and the miners forgot their resolve to keep silence and uttered a cheer. Bunker, however, was beginning to recover his self-possession, and he remembered that he was not without means of retort.

"I understand very clearly why you uphold them," he said. "You know all their troubles are due to Dave Bond, and you are so infatuated with the fellow that you have lost all prudence. Better look to yourself, not to the miners!"

"How dare you bring my name into this affair?" Ettala cried, her eyes flashing.

"I dare do anything to quiet a woman's insolent tongue, and if you are not careful I will say more. Your record since you knew Bond will hardly bear investigation."

The words had scarcely passed his lips when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder, and he looked around and saw Giant Dave, himself.

The miner's face was pale, and his eyes blazed with a suppressed fury before which Bunker shrank back in fear.

"You mean snake!" said the giant, huskily, "thar ain't anything too bad fur you ter say, is thar? Luckily, you opened yer mouth in my hearin', this time, an' you've got ter answer fur it. I don't allow no slurs while I'm around, an' I won't b'ar them. Git down on yer knees an' beg Miss Danforth's pardon!"

"I haven't said anything," answered Bunker, half-defiantly, but still cowering.

"It makes no diff'rence what you've said or ain't said; you've sneered at a lady whose shoes you ain't fit ter black, an' you've got ter swaller thar words. Down on yer knees!"

Giant Dave was no longer the mild, meek man his associates had known; he towered aloft

in all his grand strength, and his face was full of lofty indignation. He forced the mine-owner down at one motion of his powerful hand, at the last word and, just then, the fellow would have given a good deal had he never made war on his employee.

He begged Ettala's pardon with such haste that he hardly knew what he said, and then, as the girl hastened away, alarmed at the storm her impulsive interruption had caused, Dave turned and walked deliberately toward his cabin.

Bunker proceeded with his work, but his heart was no longer in it. He saw that the people were gradually turning against him; that dark looks met him on all sides; that there were suspicious mutterings among the men; and he sincerely wished Joseph Danforth had shot himself before he enlisted him in the work of warring on Giant Dave.

But the work of expelling the miners was done; they were homeless; and, so far, Bunker had had matters his own way. There were those, however, who prophesied that the day's work would yet cost him dearly.

Silver-Plated Sol watched the grizzly with a sort of fascination as the beast advanced upon the log. Thus far, he had not been seen in turn, and he certainly had no desire to attract his attention.

If Old Eph was not in a sociable mood he was welcome to "pass by on the other side."

Eph advanced along the log in a careless way which showed that he was accustomed to the road, and he had gone half the distance before his mood changed.

Suddenly, however, he paused; his nose was elevated; and his gaze became fixed on the man suspended in the air.

A long pause followed. Man and beast looked at each other steadily, but neither stirred. On the part of Eph, he seemed to be decidedly surprised. His countenance was not so capable of photographing his mind as is a human face, but it was plain to Sol that he was at fault.

Doubtless, he had traversed the bridge a good many times before, but never until then had he noticed this peculiar feature of the log-bridge. Possibly, he was wondering if it had grown there like a mushroom—but this point is immaterial.

Several seconds rolled away without activity on Eph's part, and then he gave signs of life. Still keeping his gaze fixed on the man, he advanced until directly beneath him, and then proceeded to view him again critically.

What conclusion he arrived at is uncertain, but it is possible he thought he saw something good for his stomach. At any rate, a wicked gleam appeared in his eyes and he proceeded to sit erect and put up his paws for a closer acquaintance.

Danger had fairly begun.

Eph reached for his victim, but he was not a very stalwart beast anyway, and he fell short over a foot. He pawed the air in a helpless way for a while, and then settled down and showed his teeth in a vicious way.

Colton had watched him narrowly, and not always with indifference, but when he had seen the matter tested, he began to feel more at ease.

"You've got to grow awhile yet, uncle Eph," he coolly observed. "Suppose you pass on and take a year's vacation?"

It seemed a fair proposal, but Eph treated it with silent disdain. He seemed to meditate, and then tried the length of his paws again with the old result.

However, he was not inclined to give up, and he stalked across the log to the eastern bank of the canyon. Silver-Plated Sol now grew freshly uneasy. A shelf of rock projected to the tree from which he was suspended, meeting the limb, and made a road which even a brute could not fail to find if he searched in earnest.

The grizzly was in earnest, and he soon found the road; more than that he advanced upon the limb.

Sol watched him anxiously. The limb was thick and strong, and fully capable of bearing all the weight upon it, and it bent but little as Eph walked forward. He advanced until directly above Sol, and then paused and looked longingly down.

The tied-up man was still beyond his reach.

After a little delay he lay down, and then one of his paws was thrust over and toward Sol. It did not reach him by several inches; in vain Eph swung his paw around and tried to lengthen his leg; it remained a fact that he would have to grow, as Sol advised, before he could do any harm.

The prisoner had been too busy watching him to pay attention to anything else, but when a slight sound below caused him to look down, he saw two other grizzlies on the bridge.

The whole family was coming to the matinee.

The new-comers were as interested as the first, and each tried his success at rearing and reaching up, and Sol had the pleasure, such as it was, of seeing a paw waving both above and below him, while the half-protruding claws told what would be his fate if one of them should get a fair chance at him.

That they would do so finally seemed proba-

ble, and they seemed to work together with such harmony that he half-expected to see one of the lower ones mount on the shoulders of the other and end the matter at once.

"This is the most interesting menagerie I ever saw," thought the rover, "but I'll be hanged if I like it. Perhaps that fellow above will jump off and alight on me, or the villainous trio may gnaw off the rope and let me down. Silver-Plated Sol, this is a *leettle* the worst fix you ever got into!"

If he was troubled, the grizzlies were puzzled. They wanted the man, but they did not know how to get at him. They walked back and forth, and viewed him from various points, and seemed to be getting in ill-humor, but all that did not help them in the least.

The fellow on the limb kept his place and seemed to consider himself a guard. Now and then he stretched down one foot, as though hoping his leg had lengthened, but always without success.

Perhaps half an hour had worn away in this way when a fourth grizzly appeared, and Sol felt a thrill run through his whole body. The new-comer was a giant in size—the king of grizzlies, it seemed—and the rover felt an unpleasant conviction that his great size would enable him to reach the body which grizzlydom desired.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

OLD EPH'S CLAWS.

THE giant grizzly advanced along the log with a slow and stately tread. He seemed oblivious to the fact that a man was swinging in mid-air, or that others of his tribe were on the log ahead of him, and one would have said he was a veritable monarch of the woods out on a royal excursion.

As he advanced the lesser brutes gave ground somewhat, but still remained looking upward, and the giant came to a halt and directed his attention the same way. Perhaps he considered it beneath his dignity to express surprise; at any rate, he looked with what seemed philosophical indifference.

Sol Colton, however, felt an uneasiness he had not before entertained. He marked Old Eph's stature and dreaded the result of investigations.

The test soon came. The giant deliberately reared, and it seemed as though a mountain of flesh was arising. He put out one paw and made a stroke; it missed its grip by the fraction of an inch.

Again the paw swept forward, and Sol saw the deadly claws glisten in the fading light. A particle of his shirt was caught and torn away resistlessly; another inch and it would have been his skin. The big grizzly seemed likely to fulfill Burbank's assertion that they would cut him into shreds.

The fellow bear on the limb above was aroused to new life and gave variety to the performance by reaching down, but it was chiefly on the king that attention needed to be bestowed.

And Old Eph did come again, sweeping his muscular paw forward, and evidently bent on finishing his work.

Silver-Plated Sol started back in keen alarm as the giant's claws literally tore the shirt from his breast, but wounding him only slightly.

"I'm in for slaughter!" he concluded, looking at the banks of the canyon in a vain hope of aid. "I can't stand out against the pressure, and I reckon I may as well—Ha!"

He escaped another stroke by an involuntary lift upward, and it gave him an idea. A certain degree of motion was still left him—might he not avoid the giant's strokes in precisely the same way he had avoided the last?

He tried it, and though it was a work of labor, found that he was not so helpless as he had thought, though great care had to be used not to bound within reach of his neighbor on the limb.

The matter was becoming serious, however, and Sol knew it could not last in that fashion for a great while. He had been suspended so long that sharp pains were shooting through his limbs and body, while his hands and feet felt as though they had turned to stone, or, more properly, had no feeling at all. Add to this the fact that the huge grizzly was liable to reach him at any moment, and he felt that he might as well give up the battle first as last.

"I'd give my last red to be free and armed with a revolver for a moment," he thought, grating his teeth, as he avoided another stroke from Old Eph. "I'd make it lively for that cock-eyed villain!"

That there was anything unusual about Eph's eyes did not appear, but the uncomplimentary term was excusable.

After that stroke, however, Eph settled down and remained quiet for awhile. His gaze was fixed on Sol in an evil way, and it was plain no love was lost between them, but what followed was not to be expected.

Eph wheeled and trotted along the log, followed by his two associates, and in two minutes the three were out of sight. Only the one on the limb remained.

"What now?" wondered Colton. "Have they gone to summon the whole family of grizzlies? By Jupiter! I hope so; it'll make matters more lively!"

There was desperation in his remarks, but his mood was suited to his situation. He began to feel his pains anew, and each limb and bone seemed trying to outdo his fellows. The sun no longer lighted the vicinity, and gathering shadows heralded the rapid approach of night. What new forms of torture darkness would bring, or what other animals would appear on the scene, he had no means of knowing.

If one of the cat tribe came, his career was likely to soon be ended.

He was unprepared for what occurred next.

The rocks suddenly rung with a sound which the canyon and cliffs sent back with varied echoes, and the grizzly on the limb suddenly arose with a snarl of rage or pain; then, slipping from the limb despite his efforts to preserve his balance, he swung his legs at vacancy and went shooting into the depths of the chasm below.

"A rifle-shot!" cried Sol, raising his head with sudden hope. "Who fired?"

As though to answer his question, a man appeared on the ledge which led to the limb, and in a moment more he was working out toward the rover.

Sol did not recognize him, but it was neither Danforth nor Burbank, and he caught at the hope of escape.

"Quick, here!" he said. "You've disposed of one grizzly, but there are others about, and there'll be warm work if you are found here."

"I ketch your meanin', neighbor," was the answer; "ther more so 'cause I see'd 'em myself. But I'll hev you out o' this in a jiffy."

He spoke confidently, but, owing to the peculiar way in which the rover was tied, several "jiffies" must have passed before he succeeded in drawing him upon the limb and, from there, to the ledge.

Sol Colton was free, but he was perfectly helpless. His feet refused to bear his weight or move at his will, and when his rescuer tried to carry him bodily, he found the weight more than he could manage.

He was equal to the emergency, however. He removed the rover's boots, and then began chafing his feet vigorously. The circulation of blood must be speedily restored; all depended upon it.

Sol found it difficult to avoid sinking into a stupor. With the reaction came a sense of utter weariness which blunted that of danger, and he would almost have been indifferent had a grizzly been standing over him.

Not so his rescuer. He was fully awake to the dangers of the hour, and while he worked he watched anxiously. He knew it was more luck than anything else that he had killed the first grizzly so easily; if another arrived, the chances were he would vanquish both men.

But luck was now with the adventurers, and the stranger's vigorous efforts soon sufficed to put life and a degree of energy into the rover. When again helped to his feet he found they were not so useless as before, and when his rescuer put his arm about his waist they managed to walk away.

How far they went Sol did not know; the journey was like a dream; but, at length, they entered some sort of a cave.

"I reckon what you need now is a drink o' whisky an' a sleep," the stranger suggested.

"Very likely."

"Thar ain't no grizzlies hyar."

"Can't you send for a few?"

"Eh? Do you want 'em?"

"They are great friends of mine."

The rescuer made a grimace. Sol's vacant manner and his peculiar remarks, told that his mind was far from being right, and his host hastened to make him a bed of pine boughs, cover it with a blanket and get him to lie down.

Five minutes after this was done Sol was wholly unconscious. He had sunk into slumber, or something akin to it, and grizzlies might come or go and he would take no heed.

When he awoke, daylight was feebly shining into the cave. At first he had no idea where he was, but the events of the preceding day gradually recurred to him, and though all was like a dream from the time he was rescued, he managed to get a tolerably clear idea of what had happened.

He sat erect, and as he did so a man came forth from the shadows at the interior of the cave.

"Hallo, pard!" he said, bluffly.

Sol looked at him in surprise.

"Hallo, Sam Leach!" he then answered, recognizing one of the stage-robbers.

"You know me better than you did last night," said Sam, with a chuckle.

"I should observe. I was pretty near laid out then, but I reckon Richard is himself again. Old man, I owe you one!"

"What fur?"

"What for? Well, I should remark that 'twas for taking me out of the confoundedest fix I ever was in."

"How did you get fixed that way?"

"Samuel, that's one of the things I can't tell,

but the men who tied me up will wish they had kept to themselves. I'm going back to Bowlder Bar this P. M., and I'll make Rome howl with a big roar. It's war to the knife!"

"Will you take me in?" Leach eagerly asked.

Sol hesitated for a moment, for he did not forget what he owed to the robber, but he had always found that a lone hand counts more in the end than any other, when it can be played at all, and he did not satisfy the man's wishes. His refusal was, however, made in such a way that no offense could be taken.

The rover found that he was in nearly as good condition as ever, though there was a slight lameness in his limbs, consequent on the strain to which they had been subjected.

Had it seemed necessary, he would have returned to the Bar at once, but it was just as well to wait for night and make a secret visit.

Accordingly, the day was spent in and about the cave, and Leach was as attentive as could be wished. One thing, however, Sol noted as peculiar. His host seemed anxious to keep him away from the interior of the cave. Naturally, this awoke suspicion, and the rover suspected that Lois Orme might be imprisoned there, but he managed to get a view and saw a bearded man in bed, and then he tried no more to solve Sam's secret.

Whoever the man had there, he was very anxious to keep him from being recognized, and Sol concluded it was probably some crooked associate who had got into trouble through ways that were dark. He let the matter rest, however, and prepared to return to Bowlder Bar.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"IT IS FOR LIFE!"

ETTALA DANFORTH was unhappy—wretched. Troubles seemed accumulating about her. Lois was missing, Joseph had grown stern and cruel, and there seemed a determined persecution of Dave Bond. Until the late events she had not suspected how much she cared for the miner, but all her indignation was aroused against his enemies, and though she did not think of associating her feelings with love, she would willingly have fought zealously in his behalf had she possessed the power.

There had been a stormy scene between her and Joseph, in which he commanded her to forsake the miner, but he had thrown away a good deal of rhetoric.

He might as well have tried to move a rock.

In vain Ettala looked about her for a friend to whom she could apply for aid. She felt that if she were a man she could help Dave and rescue Lois, wherever the latter was, but to whom could she apply that would accomplish all those wonders?

She could think of no one, and in a sort of despair she remembered the Magician of Madrock Ledge. He had told some true things about her at her former visit. At that time she had not known whether to regard them as derived from natural or unnatural sources, but her mind dwelt persistently on Hamed; she felt anxious to see what he would tell her about her missing friend, and she ended by resolving to again visit the Magician's house.

It was the evening after Bunker had driven the miners out of the cabins, and two hours after dark.

Ettala put on her outer garments and secretly left the house. She was soon on her way to Madrock Ledge. She took a wide course, so as to avoid observation in the village, and she was soon where the only light was that which gleamed from the lone house on the ledge.

As she moved up the shelf of rock her courage wavered perceptibly; it was a different thing to go alone from going with a companion; but she would not allow herself to abandon the enterprise, and she went on.

As usual, Sing-So opened the door, but Hamed was standing close behind him, and he made a motion for her to enter. Somehow, it lacked his usual dignity and impressiveness, but she did not stop to analyze it.

She entered, and the Chinaman closed the door behind her.

"If your business is professional, we will go to the inner room," said the Magician, calmly.

"It is," Ettala replied, with a strength which surprised her.

"Then follow me."

Hamed went to his room of prophecy, and Ettala was soon seated in the chair she occupied on a former occasion.

"I wish to learn the present whereabouts of a missing person," she said, abruptly.

"I will aid you," calmly answered the Magician. "What is his name?"

"It is a lady, and her name is Lois Orme."

"I remember her; she called with you on a night not long ago. I can easily trace her."

He arranged his instrument and looked within.

"The girl left Bowlder Bar in company with a tall, dark complexioned man of middle age," he said. "I judge he was a stranger in this town. He came alone and had a secret interview with the girl. What was said I do not know, but they left the Bar on horses and rode

due south. I can see them now. They are in No Luck, Colorado."

"No Luck! Where is that?"

"Just over the line of the State. They are at a hotel and talking earnestly. I judge that he is aiding her to accomplish some important object, but that difficulties—perhaps dangers—lie in their way. Why they went, or what they seek to do, I have no means of knowing, but the stars shine brightly upon them and I prophesy success for them. Some day the girl will send word to you; I believe you will meet her again. At any rate, all will be well. I can tell no more."

Hamed was closing his instrument, but she stopped him with a gesture. She asked more questions about Lois, but it did, indeed, seem that he had told all he knew. He certainly told no more.

Ettala approached the remaining subject with considerable diffidence, the more so because she had repeatedly told herself she was foolish to speak of it anyway; but she had come to a decision, and would not change her mind.

She asked concerning David Bond.

"I have heard through my Chinese servant of the difficulty at the village with which he is connected," said the Magician, calmly. "I need only glance at his past and future. The past is dark. He has lived a life of which he certainly will never tell. It has been full of disgrace and dark deeds; it is one I do not care to describe to you. Shun him, if you are acquainted with him, as you would an adder. No good can come of such acquaintances. Under a plausible exterior he carries a heart like a tiger. You had better die than think seriously of him."

This solemn warning fell on unbelieving ears, and all Ettala's faith in fortune-telling vanished; she even suspected that Joseph's hand was visible in this dismal arraignment, though how he should know she would visit Hamed was not clear.

"You seem to take a very cheerful view of your fellow-beings," she said, with latent sarcasm.

"Professionally, I take no view at all," was the unmoved reply. "Through the aid of the stars I am able to see people as they are, and as I find them so I describe them, if at all."

Ettala repressed a bitter retort, and then announced that she had heard all she cared to know. They went to the outer room and Sing-So moved forward to unbar the door.

As he did so a peculiar sliding sound was heard at one side of the room, followed by a dull thud. It was as though something had fallen between the outer wall and plastering of the house, and the girl would have thought nothing of it, had it not been for another circumstance.

She was looking directly at Hamed, and she saw him start and raise his gaze quickly to the upper part of the room. One moment he looked startled and troubled, but his strong face soon assumed its usual expression.

He made a motion to Sing-So, and the Chinaman unclosed the door, and Ettala passed out. She had no desire to linger in such company.

When the door had closed behind her, however, and she was alone on the ledge, she paused and looked back. For the first time she suspected there might be a mystery connected with Hamed's house; the sound she had heard, the brief trepidation of the Magician and the significant glances which passed between him and Sing-So, all combined betrayed the fact that there was something there not generally known.

Ettala paused and looked. She saw the light disappear from the lower room and suspected it had been taken to the upper one, and she watched for its reappearance until she remembered that there were no windows in the upper portion.

She was about to turn away when a fresh sound reached her ears—a dull, muffled sound, it is true; but she could almost have sworn a revolver had been fired near the point from which had proceeded the previous peculiar sounds.

Considerably excited, Ettala listened further, but the sound was not repeated. Several minutes passed away, and then the light reappeared in the lower room and Hamed's house seemed to resume its usual tranquillity.

Satisfied there was no more to be heard, Ettala descended the ledge, wondering what mystery belonged to the place. There had never been anything before to indicate that other people than Hamed and Sing-So lived there, but she was now sure the whole history of the house had never been told.

What meant the revolver-shot?

She would have asked the question more earnestly had she suspected that Lois Orme had been but lately confined there—perhaps was still there.

The current of her thoughts was abruptly changed, however, as she reached the foot of the ledge and a man's form appeared in the darkness. She at once recognized Dave Bond, and we need hardly say her brief fears speedily vanished.

"I didn't think o' seein' you here," he said, "but I'm glad it's so. I've got a word to say to you."

"I will listen willingly," she said, softly.

"I'm goin' away from the Bar."

"Going away?"

Ettala repeated with a start.

"Yas."

"For what reason?"

"Because I'm a disturbin' element hyar. Ther boyees has got inter trouble through me, an' if I cl'ar out, I reckon things will soon settle back inter ther old channel an' all go smooth. I hav been ther innercent means o' gittin' them inter ther fix, an' I'm sorry on't; ther best thing I kin do now is ter leave."

The giant's voice was far from steady, and his whole manner betrayed excitement and sorrow.

Ettala was silent for several seconds. When she spoke, there was a perceptible sadness in her voice.

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know; anywhar, so that I won't bring harm ter my friends hyar. I reckon I'm bound ter bring ill-luck ter them that know me, but I'll soon be forgot."

"Never!" said Ettala, with emphasis. "We—at least I, for one, do not forget so easily. You are brave and noble, and I shall never forget!"

"Your words do me good," said Dave, in an unsteady voice, "fur your good opinion is worth more than that of all the rest of the world. I wish I could stay an' be near you."

"Why can't you? You have done no harm. Remain and battle against those who would misuse you."

"I ain't su'e it's safe. Thar is more ter think on than them. Every hour I am near you I am gittin' deeper an' deeper inter trouble. I love you, little girl, an' it's so hopeless—"

He paused, as though for words, but Ettala laid her hand in his.

"It is not hopeless!" she answered, softly. "You cannot care for me more than I do for you, and I am willing to make your destiny mine and follow your fortunes ever."

"Am I dreamin'?" he muttered in bewilderment. "Is this a gleam o' sunshine that'll vanish in an hour?"

"It is for life!" she answered.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SILVER PLATED SOL TAKES THE WAR-PATH.

It was several minutes before the young couple were capable of speaking with practical directness, but by the time they did so a complete understanding had been effected. Cupid had done his work well; their love was mutual; and, though Dave had pointed out the troubles she would dare, Ettala had avowed her intention to follow the young giant's fortunes, let the future bring what it might.

When they came to talk practically, it was she who advanced the clearest ideas, but between them the following plan was formed: Dave was to remain in Bowlder Bar for awhile, until the sequel of the present trouble was seen, and then be guided by the result.

While matters were thus situated, it was best that he and Ettala should be seen together but little, but they had decided to baffle all plots to separate them by promptly seeking a minister and uniting their fortunes for life.

Time was precious, and they marked the hour and then started for the house of the Reverend Mr. Brown; but only a short distance had been traveled when a man arose in their path.

Dave drew his revolver, but the man put out one hand reassuringly.

"Save your bullets, for I'm not worth the powder," he nonchalantly said.

"Silver-Plated Sol!" Dave exclaimed.

"That's my name."

"I thought you was mysteriously missin'."

"So I am, from some sections, but not from here. Have you seen Lovering, of late?"

"I reckon he's lookin' fer you," answered Dave. "He was 'round ter my cabin this afternoon."

"Sorry, but it can't be helped. How are matters at the Bar?"

Giant Dave hesitated for a moment, and then asked the rover to step aside. He knew he was a man to be trusted, and it had occurred to him that he would be just the man for a marriage witness. Therefore he told him all.

Sol listened and was pleased. He felt sure Bond was a worthy man who would make Ettala a good husband, and the contemplated step would be a severe blow to Joseph Danforth. He therefore declared that the young couple were acting wisely, and that he would be pleased to help them all he could.

The trio went to a minister's house, and when they came away Ettala was Mrs. David Bond. For weal or for woe the deed was done, and Luke Burbank's chances of ever winning the woman he aspired to marry were few and small.

By this time Sol considered himself sufficiently established in Ettala's good graces to inquire about Lois. He hoped that he could get information in regard to her whereabouts, but, as we already know, Ettala was as ignorant as himself.

She did, however, hesitatingly tell what had occurred during her recent visit to Hamed, and

when he was once more alone the rover's thoughts returned to the subject. He did not for a moment consider the Magician's statement in regard to Lois's presence in the town of No Luck, but Hamed was worthy of attention.

"Who, and what, is the old fossil? Of course he is a humbug; that goes without saying. Even if there was anything in fortune-telling, which there is not, no one could get a living in a town of this size. Therefore, it follows that Hamed is not what he seems. What the dickens is he, then? I'll be shot if I know, but it won't be a waste of time to call on him. I'd like to know just what game he is playing. As for the sound from the attic, when something rattled down the wall, and the subsequent revolver-shot, it looks as though he has a boarder up there. Hallo!"

The last word was brought forth by a sudden idea, and the rover stopped short and seriously considered it.

"Where is Lois Orme?" mentally inquired Colton. "Hamed professed to know, and his so-called revelation would lead a searcher far away from Bowlder Bar. Perhaps he had an object. It wouldn't be anything remarkable if the girl was a prisoner in his den!"

It was a suspicion without any real foundation, but a long life of danger and battling against adverse elements had led Sol to always be looking for obscure facts, and he had now struck a theory which was worth testing, even though it had so precarious an origin.

"I'll visit Hamed!" he declared, aloud, and then he strode rapidly toward the Magician's house.

He had almost entirely recovered from the effects of his rough experience at Grizzlies' Bridge, and though he intended to keep out of sight of Danforth and Burbank for awhile, he felt able to meet danger with his old coolness, while as for trouble he intended to meet it half-way thenceforth and give his enemies no chance to get the best of him.

He had left Sam Leach at the cave, but that man had announced that he would soon visit the village, and that he might be of use to the rover.

Madrock Ledge was soon reached, and Sol ascended with a steady step. All seemed quiet there, and the light gleamed tranquilly from the window.

Sol advanced to the door and was about to apply his knuckles when the idea occurred to him that it would not be a bad idea to get a view of the interior without being seen in return. But could this be done? The curtain was down, and means of observation were not then visible.

He was not easily discouraged, however, and he made an investigation which ended in establishing the fact that the window was not fastened, so he raised it a little and prepared to push the curtain aside. Voices were audible from the interior, and something of interest might be heard.

"It's a burglarious piece of work," he muttered, "but it's only putting magic against a magician, and—here goes!"

He moved the curtain slightly and looked within.

The first view was enough to enchain all his interest.

Three persons were visible, of whom two were Hamed and Sing-So.

The third was Lois Orme!

Despite his half-formed suspicion, Sol was surprised, and he remained staring blankly at the girl. Hamed was standing near her, while Sing-So was busy at one side, and as the rover's mind cleared he was not troubled to perceive that he had not happened on a friendly interview.

Lois's face was paler than usual, and she had the air of one in captivity, but she was looking defiantly at Hamed, who answered the look with one of dogged resolution.

"Threats and entreaties are alike useless," he was saying. "I have carefully considered my course, and I give you fair warning that it is to your interest to follow my lead. I am not going to have you throw away what chance and your own good sense have placed in your hands, and you had better yield and make the best of it."

"Res assured I never shall yield!" Lois declared, defiantly, while her eyes spoke even more strongly than her words.

"Then you remain a prisoner here indefinitely. Your attempt at escape to-night has opened my eyes, and I think if I tie your hands, my plans will be safer, as well as my life. You will not have another chance to shoot at me."

"I did not intend to fire," the girl replied, less steadily. "I caught the revolver from your belt as a means of protection, and it was accidentally discharged."

"Rubbish! That story has been used so often it is stale. You tried to shoot me—do not deny it. And I am your father!"

Silver-Plated Sol started. To him, at least, the assertion was a surprise.

"You are a fine father!" sarcastically retorted Lois.

"A legal one, at least," Hamed coldly replied.

"No one regrets the fact so much as I."

"No doubt. You have stolen the money of Abram Selden, and now you want to enjoy it alone, or perhaps with Charles Winter. But I will foil both you and the so-called Joseph Danforth."

"I have repeatedly told you that Danforth is not Charles Winter, nor do I know where the latter is. Perhaps it is a waste of time to deny all your charges, but when you ultimately fail to find one cent of Abram Selden's money, you will not so strongly believe I stole it. But why should we talk? You, who ought of all men to think well of me—if you are, indeed, my father—persist in believing me a thief. It is as well so, perhaps, but let us say no more about it."

"Understand me first," said the Magician, harshly. "You remain a prisoner until you come to your senses."

"I am not so sure of that; I have a presentiment that something will occur in my behalf which will baffle you. But I have no more to say to you; I will not speak again."

She had made no weak resolution, for all Hamed's efforts to continue the conversation failed. She seemed utterly deaf to what he said, and he finally abandoned the attempt, an ugly look on his face, and turned to Sing-So.

"Is all ready?" he asked.

"All light," the Chinaman replied.

"Then we will conduct this girl again to her prison, and I'll bet my life she does not again attempt escape. Come!"

He put out his hand to Lois, and she arose and followed him without a word. They disappeared through a door which the spy knew led to the upper part of the house, and he was left without an object of interest upon which to gaze.

"Well, upon my word, the case takes on a new complexion. Lois is the prisoner of Hamed, and it seems that Hamed is her father. This is strange, but peculiar things will happen. One more must happen; the girl saved my life in the burning house, and I am not going to prove ungrateful. She must be rescued. I begin to doubt if she was in any way connected with the murder of Roger Hillard; she hasn't the face of an assassin. She must be rescued, but how?"

A moment longer the rover hesitated, and then he pushed the window further up and quickly, but noiselessly, entered. He was fairly in the lair of the Magician.

He flashed a quick look about, and was not long in finding a hiding-place. Furniture was plentiful, and behind a drop-board table which stood in one corner, loaded with various objects, he ensconced himself without delay.

"Now for the next move in the game!" he thought. "I am fairly on the war-path, and—"

His thoughts took a new turn as steps sounded on the stairway, and then Hamed and Sing-So came down and entered the room where he was hiding.

Would he be detected?

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE HEATHEN CHINEE'S IRON GRIP.

HAMED's face bore a scowl, and he kicked over a chair with boyish exhibition of temper.

"I'm going out now," he said, "and shall not return to-night. Keep everything fastened up tightly, and don't answer any calls until I return. If people should once turn a suspicious eye on our dove-cote, they would be very likely to investigate us, and hang both to the nearest tree."

"Me no want my float stretched," said Sing-So, with manifest uneasiness.

"I thought not. Well, eternal vigilance is the price of safety, as well as liberty, and you want to look a little out."

As he spoke the Magician walked to the window and tried it. Then he wheeled around abruptly.

"You confounded fool! why did you leave this unfastened?"

"Me no leab it so; Melican man hisself do it, when he lookee out, all samee."

The reply cooled off the irate Magician, for he suddenly remembered that he had left it thus, but he fastened it securely, and then repeated his caution to Sing-So to guard the place well.

"Perhaps the revolt of our prisoner has made me nervous, but I feel ill at ease," he then said. "I would not leave here, but I am wanted elsewhere. Look well to everything!"

Sing-So again asserted that he would be faithful, and then Hamed passed into the inner room.

Sol Colton looked after him thoughtfully. His voice had been different, while he was alone with his servant, than before, and the rover was inclined to think he had heard it elsewhere. But where? He asked himself the question, but no answer was forthcoming. Unless the Magician lived a double life, he could not imagine where he had seen him.

The Chinaman put the outer room in order, while Sol every moment expected to see Hamed reappear, but he came not. Several minutes passed, but there was no sound from the other apartment.

Then Sing-So extinguished the light, and darkness reigned all around them.

What had become of the Magician? He had distinctly said that he had business elsewhere and must go out, but he certainly had not passed through the main room, and there was supposed to be but one place of exit. The opinion grew with Sol that there really was another, and that Hamed was gone, and he turned his thoughts upon the proposed rescue of Lois.

How was it to be done?

Sing-So had lain down on his rude bed, and, judging by his want of motion, was fast nearing Celestial dream-land. That the intruder's presence was unsuspected was clear, but how was he to accomplish his object without betraying himself?

Unless Sing-So was an unusually heavy sleeper, it could not be done.

Sol had unlimited confidence in his ability to handle the fellow as he would a child, but he did not want to betray the fact that he had been there by any such encounter.

He wished in vain that he had a quantity of chloroform with him, but as he did not carry a drug-store in his pocket, the idea was not to be entertained.

He decided to wait until Sing-So gave evidence of being asleep, and then to move secretly while he could. Such evidence was soon given. Sing-So began to breathe heavily, and then to snore in a way that was weird, startling and resonant.

Sol waited patiently, and when the time seemed ripe, crawled from under the table. He was fully launched on his venture, but what the result would be no one could tell.

He had carefully marked the position of the door which led to Lois's prison, and he stole in that direction with extreme caution.

He expected to hear the Chinaman start up, but Sing-So slept peacefully on; perhaps he dreamed of his youth in the Flowery Land.

The adventurer reached the door. It was secured with a bar, but this was easily removed, and he passed cautiously through and reclosed the door. He felt steps ahead of him and began to ascend. They creaked dismally under his feet and gave cause for fresh doubts, but all remained silent and Sol pushed on steadily.

The top of the stairs was soon reached and he found himself in an unknown quarter. At first he thought there was no light whatever, but a faint gleam as from the floor arrested his attention and he was not at fault to explain it.

He moved on once more and found another door. Like the other, it was barred, but the obstacle was soon removed and, after a brief hesitation, he pressed the latch and passed through.

Then he suddenly paused.

Once more he was in the presence of Lois Orme.

The girl sat in a chair near a rude bed. Her hands were bound together, while a rope extended from them to the bed post, giving her a chance to either lie down or to occupy the chair, but at the same time making her comparatively helpless.

She had heard the sound of Sol's entrance, and the light in the room enabled her to see him clearly. She had started up, an alarmed look on her face, but it gave place to one of doubt as she recognized the rover. He ought not to come as an enemy, and yet—why was he there?

He quickly closed the door, and then removed his hat and put out one hand reassuringly.

"Have no fear, Miss Orme," he said kindly. "I am not one of your enemies, and I'll help you out of this fix if you say so."

"Can you do it?" she breathlessly asked.

"I can try hard. We are in the lair of the enemy, but the victory is not always to the evil. I'm surprised to see you a prisoner here."

"It was Hamed who kidnapped me," she bitterly said. "He is my enemy, though—though—"

"Well?"

"How does it happen you are here if he is not your friend?"

"Just the question he would be likely to ask if he saw me," said Sol, with a laugh. "I ambled in through the window, unseen by either Hamed or Chop-Stick-Wah-Ho, the Celestial, and here I am, as you may perceive. Now, then, shall we get out of here?"

"Gladly!" she answered, earnestly. "Rescue me, and my warmest thanks will ever be yours."

"I don't forget that you saved me in the fire, and I trust I am not without gratitude. Here we go!"

The last remark referred to the fact that he had severed her bonds. She stood erect, free.

"How are we going to pass my captors? How did you pass them coming in?"

The second question followed the first abruptly, and was naturally suggested thereby, and Sol briefly explained the situation below.

"I trust we may be able to walk out unmolested," he said, "but if the worst comes, I have a six-shooter here which will clear the way, if judiciously used. I have the most fear of old Hamed. Do you think we are likely to meet him?"

"I don't know. I did not suppose he ever

went outside, and a new phase of his character seems developed."

"I'm inclined to think he has several of them," dryly observed the rover, "but that don't help us out. We have got to run the gantlet, and we may as well be about it."

They made such preparations as were possible, and then moved cautiously toward the stairs.

All continued silent below.

They stole down with as little noise as possible, though the creaking of the boards sounded louder than ever, and were soon on the ground floor.

Sol cautiously opened the door.

Sing-So was still making the air vocal, and Sol's hopes of escaping without discovery increased.

They began the passage to the outer door.

They were not destined to do so successfully, however, for they had taken but a few steps when the Chinaman bounded up as though operated by springs and stood in their path. He shouted something in a shrill voice, but as Sol was not a Chinese scholar he did not know what it was. No words were needed, however, to make it clear that they were in danger; Sing-So had awakened just when he ought to have slept, and it seemed that his gaze pierced the darkness and comprehended the exact trouble.

Before the rover could move the Chinaman made a dash to one side, but as Sol knew he was making for some weapon, he prepared to put an end to his scheme immediately.

He leaped forward in turn, catching Sing-So, and then essayed to hurl him to the floor, but it was soon clear that Sing-So had been underrated in the bill. He turned on Sol like a tiger, and caught him by the throat with a grip which bade fair to crush everything between his fingers.

Lois had uttered one cry, but after that she was cooler than could be expected. She might have escaped from the house, but she would not leave her rescuer. She looked in vain for a way to help him.

Colton would have laughed at the idea of needing help to lay out the "Chinee," but he soon found that he had caught a full-grown cyclone, metaphorically speaking. Sing-So had muscles of iron, and he was either an accomplished wrestler or a remarkably lucky one. He glided eel-like from Sol's pet "locks," and the longer they struggled the fresher he seemed to become.

The rover was far from being contented. He was not afraid of Sing-So, but he expected every moment to see Hamed appear on the scene and discover what was going on.

"It mustn't happen!" muttered Sol, through his set teeth. "I'll break this heathen in two!"

He redoubled his efforts, and the two whirled about the room in a way which sent chairs and other articles of furniture spinning about like tops.

Lois chanced to find the lamp before it was sent to ruin, and she finally managed to get a light, though not sure one was safe. Sol, however, resolved to make practical use of it. If he couldn't worst the Chinaman in the present style, there was a trick or two not yet tried.

He planned his trick well, and when he had Sing-So where he wanted him, ran him backward with resistless force until the heathen's feet struck a fallen chair.

That was the last of Sing-So. He went over backward like a falling tree, and Sol landed heavily on top of him. Another moment and a heavy knee was on the Chinaman's breast, and a strong hand on his throat.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

LOIS.

"STAY where you are!" sharply directed the rover. "I have you foul, and I'll shut off some of your wind if you don't lie still!"

Sing-So looked up with a face the personification of meekness.

"Me no wantee gittee up," he asserted.

"You're a liar, John, but it don't count in the roll of honor. You've got a muscle like an ox, and I must ask you to keep it down. Miss Orme, please find a rope."

"Me no wantee ble hung!" cried Sing-So, alarmed at once.

"You ought to be hung, you scoundrel, and go out of the world as you've lived, but as I'm not a public executioner, I can't take justice in my hands. Ah! the rope!"

Lois had brought it, and Sing-So was soon rendered helpless. With his hands and feet tied up he was not likely to fight any more, but Sol paused with the gag above his mouth.

"Where's your master?" he demanded.

"Me not knowee, all samee."

"Very well; who is he?"

"Hamed."

"What else?"

"That all I knowee."

"Sing-So, if you belong to a church that allows such villainous lying as you're guilty of, its records ought to be burned. The truth ain't in you, or, if it is, it sticks tighter than a burr. If I had the time, I'd try to make you talk, but as 'tis, I suppose prudence requires me to tear

myself away. I'll go, but I'll be around any time I'm wanted, old man. Eat this cotton!"

He thrust an improvised gag into the fellow's mouth and the work was done; there was no more to hinder them from going at once from the house.

Lois had conducted herself admirably all through the struggle, and Sol looked at her with admiring eyes. Himself of a nature that no danger could daunt, he admired the quality in others, and not less in a woman than a man.

The light was extinguished and they went from the house. The night was intensely dark, and they had slowly commenced the descent of the ledge when Lois broke the silence.

"Where are we going now?"

"Where do you wish?"

"That I don't know. Perhaps it is as well that I should continue missing from the village, but I know of no real place of refuge."

Sol remembered the cabin jointly occupied by Lovering and himself.

"I can give you bumble quarters for awhile; perhaps long enough to bring matters to a definite point. Things are moving on in Boulder Bar, and there'll be a crash by-and-by and we can all go our ways. Until then I shall be pleased to act as protector to you; I don't forget the night in the burning building; and if I can help you through, I will."

There was much in his speech that was vague and indefinite, but it had a manly ring, and Lois hesitated but a moment. She felt the need of friends, and she felt that she could trust him, and she accepted the offer in the spirit it was made.

A few minutes later, as they journeyed down the slope to the village, Sol remembered the cloud which hung over the girl and asked himself if he had done wisely.

In Red Summit a dark crime had been committed—one of the darkest known to men. Roger Hillard had lost his life at the hands of assassins. At one time since coming to Boulder Bar Sol had considered Lois connected beyond doubt with the deed. Then she saved him from the flames and he said: "I cannot make war on this woman!" Subsequent events had served to strengthen the hold she had upon him. He felt for her a respect—he would not admit it was more—which he would not willingly feel for a murderer.

Now, he was offering her his protection, and the face of Roger Hillard seemed to arise before him, pale, sad, reproachful.

He felt angry with himself, and, for a moment, was tempted to turn upon her and repeat the charge which was in his mind, and which had been spoken of between him and Lovering, but she spoke and his mood changed.

For him, it was impossible to hear her voice and think evil of her.

They went on without meeting any one and soon reached the cabin. A light shone from the window, indicating that Lovering was there and when he pushed the door open he saw that man seated at the table, eating his supper.

Lovering sprung up and a pleased look came to his face, but it changed to one of surprise at sight of Lois.

He stood looking at the two in silence.

"Home again!" said Sol, lightly. "I believe you know this lady, Mr. Lovering."

"I do not forget easily, and the night of the fire is still vividly in my mind. Miss Orme, you are welcome."

He gave her his hand blindly, but the perplexed look was still on his face; he was wondering if it could be possible Silver-Plated Sol had brought home a wife.

The three sat down after making the place free from the danger of prying eyes, and then Lovering found voice to say he had feared trouble had come to Sol, he was so long absent. The time had not yet come for the rover to tell the story of his adventure at Grizzlies' Bridge; he did not care to have Lois hear it.

Her own affairs demanded attention first.

"I wish to know what we can do to shelter Miss Orme," the rover abruptly said. "The other room of the building is good enough for the occupancy of you or me, but will it do for her, and is it a place where she would be likely to escape observation? This cabin is the property of no one in particular, and, now that so many miners are homeless, some one may come here and demand it. We have no legal claim, and, if they insist, are not strong enough to keep them out."

"I think there is no danger," Lovering replied. "The cabin has the reputation of being 'unlucky,' and I heard the miners one and all declare to come here when they were driven out. We are safe, I am sure, and we will defend the lady to the last."

He spoke with an emphasis surprising to Sol and gratifying to Lois, and the spirits of all perceptibly arose. Lois was shown her room and she decline it all she could wish. In point of fact it was meagerly furnished, but in the crises of our life we have to be satisfied with a good deal that is unpleasant, and so it was in the present case.

Lovering preserved a grave and thoughtful, though kind, manner, and was evidently doing more meditation than either of the others. He

soon astonished Sol by turning abruptly to Lois with the remark:

"Miss Orme, more of your history is known to me than you might at first suppose, and I want to caution you to use all possible discretion. Your enemies are, perhaps, more numerous than you think."

The girl had started, while Sol frowned, and she looked at him searchingly.

"What do you know?" she asked, slowly.

"I know that Joseph Danforth is a rascal of the first water. He has been zealously trying to win your affections, but he would not do it if he did not think he would thereby have a chance to handle Abram Selden's money."

Lois flushed and glanced at Sol.

"I do not think we need discuss Miss Orme's private affairs," he said, looking almost threateningly at Lovering.

"You are right, but I must take this opportunity to say that I know a good deal about them, that I sympathize with her, and that she can always rely on me as a friend."

The girl found the topic a most unpleasant one, and, while she was not so very much averse to having Lovering know of her affairs, she felt a regret that Sol should do so. If he knew all the dark places in her life he would have a less exalted opinion of her. At the same time, there was a ring of true nobility in the elder man's voice which convinced her he meant all he said, and she could not help feeling grateful and thanking him accordingly.

Sol, however, saw that she was ill at ease, and he put an end to the conversation as soon as possible and suggested that she would, perhaps, like to retire.

It was a hint Lois did not fail to understand, but she felt that it was given with a good motive, and she thanked him with a glance and went to her room.

Sol looked angrily at his companion.

"Why did you speak of that?" he asked.

"Of what?"

"Of her past."

"Because," said Lovering, firmly, "I meant just what I said. She is a young woman in trouble; I, a man who has seen a good deal of the world and know better how to fight it than she. She would, metaphorically speaking, touch the world on the arm and ask its favor. I would take it by the throat and set my heel on its heart. But, enough of that. I have said, before to-night, that I, too, am interested in Abram Selden's money. So I am, but I regard this girl more highly. I do not believe she ever wrongfully took one cent of the fortune, and I stand ready to defend her against all dangers and all enemies!"

Lovering spoke with a subdued vehemence which surprised Sol anew, and he was more than ever impressed by the belief that there was a mystery connected with the man.

"I think I am just as ready to aid her as you are—" he began, resentfully, but Lovering interrupted him by grasping his wrist.

"How ready?"

"How ready?" Sol mechanically repeated.

"Yes. Would you risk your life for her?"

Sol laughed, but not musically.

"You're going into conundrums now," he said.

"I thought so!" muttered Lovering. "Youth is impetuous, and strong with talk, but it is the old head that is firm and true."

Colton looked at him in amazement.

"Have you lost your head, or are you in love with the girl?" he demanded.

"Neither. You are the one who has lost his head."

Sol whistled softly. The mood of his companion was one he could not solve, and he felt that it would be a waste of time to try. He sat down and yawned nonchalantly.

"Stack the cards and deal again," he coolly observed. "I don't see any use of our quarreling, pard, especially as both of us avow friendship for the lady, but—"

He paused abruptly as a rattling of glass was accompanied by the whistling of a bullet past his head, so near as to almost touch him. He had met with one of the narrowest escapes of his life, but there was no knowing what danger remained.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BOWLER BAR'S BLACK NIGHT.

WHEN Jason Bunker was encouraged to proceed to extremities with his miners, he did not suspect that those who worked up the excitement in his favor were proceeding with a double motive.

As has been said before, his "friends" of the hour were his rivals in trade—those who ran other mines; and they thought by crippling the Eighteen-Carat to help themselves. So they raised the hue and cry, and for awhile Bunker had the sympathy of the people in general—though he lost it when he ejected the miners from their homes.

This was just to the liking of Bunker's self-styled allies, and they thought they saw a chance to carry out the plot they had all along had in their minds, which was to absorb the Eighteen-Carat.

Consequently, they no sooner saw the indig-

nation which followed the driving out of Bunker's tenants than they began to work on the people. It was their wish to start a regular mob; one which would so frighten Bunker that he would sell the Eighteen-Carat for about half what it was worth.

So, while their dupe sat in his comfortable home and congratulated himself that he had brought his rebellious men to their knees, the plotters worked behind his back and, so to speak, prepared to "let loose the dogs of war."

An indignation meeting was held near the Red Horse Mine, and each of Bunker's rivals addressed the crowd; the ejection was universally and strongly condemned; and when a selected person advocated extreme measures, the chuckling mine-owners did not object.

The brand was applied, and they let the fire burn.

The mob spirit was soon rampant, and it needed only a motion to set the current toward the Eighteen-Carat. There were various things connected with it which might be burned, broken or otherwise destroyed, and they resolved to make their mark.

Away they went in a body, while the triumphant mine-owners went home to play their role of honest men.

Shortly after, Alvord, the mine-superintendent, was aroused from sleep by what seemed strange sounds, and when he arose and looked out he saw a red glow in the western sky, while in the glare of burning buildings he saw dancing men and heard their wild yells.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "the foolish miners have ruined all, now!"

He had yet to learn that very few of Bunker's men were in the mob, but, anxious to save what property he could, and knowing he had a good deal of influence with the men who had worked under him, he hurriedly dressed and started for the scene.

When he arrived matters were in a decidedly bad state. All of the shanties erected near the mine were on fire, and so far gone that they were past saving.

Alvord had been prepared to address the crowd, but as he swept a quick glance over them he failed to discover any of the former employees of the Eighteen-Carat, and then he knew the riot was not of the character he had supposed.

Turning away he hastened to the mine, where he found three of the old force, who had not been included in Bunker's discharge, keeping the rioters back. They were men he had never liked, for they were Bunker's pets, but they were making a resistance which aroused Alvord's admiration. No shots had yet been fired, but weapons were drawn and the mob seemed resolved to shed blood, if necessary, to work their will.

A hand was laid on the superintendent's arm, and he turned and saw one of the discharged miners.

"It's a black night," said the latter.

"Are you one of the rioters, Brown?"

"No. I came long with them, but I ain't lifted my hand. It seems ter be a spontaneous combustion o' indignation."

"Will you do me a favor?"

"Anything you say, Mr. Alvord."

"Then go to Bunker and bid him hasten here at once. I suspect foul play on the part of rival mine-owners, and the Eighteen-Carat will be wrecked unless something is promptly done. Say as much to Bunker and tell him to lose no time, and while you're gone I'll try to hold the mob back."

"I'll do it, but look out for yourself. There's a bad temper in ther crowd."

Brown hastened away, and the superintendent strode forward and took position with the defenders of the mine.

The rioters greeted his appearance with groans and hisses.

"Thar's one o' Bunker's pets; chuck him in Mud river!" cried a voice.

"Hold!" said Alvord, firmly. "There is no occasion for trouble here. What are you doing with the mine?"

"We're goin' ter paint it red!" was the explanation, given by the former voice. "We'll show Bunker be don't own Bowlder Bar!"

"You have already shown him, I should say," Alvord replied, steadily, while he studied the crowd as a physician notes the pulse of his patient. "The shanties are on fire, and Bunker can't fail to read your meaning. Isn't that enough? You want nothing of the mine; go away, now, and do nothing you'll be sorry for."

"This ain't our week fur bein' sorry. We're out ter clean Bunker out, an' we're goin' ter do it. Don't you talk, Alvord; we know you, an' you're no better than Bunker. Stand clear, or we'll chuck you in the river."

"I will not stand clear!" the superintendent declared. "I am here to preserve this property, and I warn you not to commit further violence. There is no reason why you should. You have already shown your displeasure, and to injure the mine is to make yourselves liable to trouble. I believe you are too sensible for that."

If he really believed so he made a great mistake, for the rioters were there on business in-

tent, and they did not intend to be turned aside. The Eighteen-Carat must be thoroughly wrecked before they would be satisfied. Groans, hisses and threats freely arose from the crowd, and some one shouted to them to move forward.

Alvord raised his revolvers.

"Back!" he exclaimed. "You are not going to enter here tamely; I give you warning of that. Back, I say!"

It was a temporary check, for the men had not come out to proceed to such extremities as murder, but when the mob-spirit is once in operation there is no telling where it will stop. The fact that Alvord opposed them so boldly added to their rage, and a rush would speedily have been made had not a new character arrived on the scene.

It was Bunker.

He had come during the lull in the proceedings and had not had a chance to learn the full temper of the mob, and his only feeling was one of intense wrath as he saw his property going to ruin.

He sprung in front of them, his broad face red with anger. If he had possessed the power he would have stricken them all lifeless where they stood.

"You infernal scoundrels!" he shouted, "how dare you meddle here? I'll have you all sent to prison! Clear out, at once, or I'll shoot you as I would so many howling wolves!"

The sight of his hated face, his hard epithets and his threats, acted like a fire-brand on the crowd. If they had been excited before they were mad now. The majority of them had no real reason for disliking him, but he had never been a popular man, and under the excitement of the hour he seemed transformed to a perfect fiend. Had they been slaves and he the wielder of the lash which scourged them, they could not have hated him more than they did in their unnatural excitement.

"Bunker! Bunker!"

"Hyar's ther man who drives people out of their houses!"

"Down with him!"

"Throw him in the river!"

"Kill him!"

These cries, arising from the crowd, showed the mine-owner the temper of those he had bearded, and his mood abruptly changed. He was not in any degree a brave man, and as they swung their weapons, hooted, jeered and threatened, he wished he was a hundred miles away.

He turned to Alvord with a very pale face.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed, "they will kill us!"

"Stand firm!" the superintendent replied, through his set teeth. "That's our only hope."

"But they are mad; they will tear us to pieces!"

"Forward! Down with Bunker!" shouted a voice, and once more the crowd started forward, while Bunker, unable to pass the mob in retreat, fell upon his knees.

His weapons rattled from his hand; he was a coward at heart, and no nerve was left him then.

But there was a fresh check to the rioters and Dave Bond sprung to their front.

He, at least, felt no fear of them. His strong face had its usual color, the light in his eyes was that of a man who will fight to the last and die facing the foe, and when he turned his revolvers on the crowd his hand did not waver the fraction of an inch.

"Hold!"

His voice arose above the shouts of the mob, and the one word checked them as completely as a regiment of common men could have done. Just then he was the most influential man in Bowlder Bar; they had been taught that they were avenging his wrongs, and what he had to say was of interest to them.

"I'd like to get an explanation o' this," he said, in a voice wholly free from excitement, as they gave him a chance to speak. "I've been told that this riot all springs out o' ther fact that I was discharged from the Eighteen-Carat. Wal, thar ain't no reason fur it; I'm wal satisfied; Jason Bunker kin go his way, hire who he wants ter an' let others alone; it's all one ter me. Thar sartainly ain't no call fur a riot. My late pards kin go ter work when they see fit. It showed a good spirit ter strike 'cause I was sent adrift, an' I thank 'em hearty, but it was foolish in 'em an' I now advise 'em ter go ter work. Men, hev you thought what you're doin'? Ef you wreck the Eighteen-Carat, thar won't be no chance fur them ter get work at all!"

This moderate speech fell like oil on the troubled waters; the rioters were not seeking to avenge Dave, but events which had grown out of his discharge, but they felt that he had a right to speak, and his voice was for peace.

But the lull which followed was broken by the report of a revolver, and Giant Dave threw up his arms and dropped to the ground.

CHAPTER XL.

THE BLACK NIGHT GROWS RED.

SILVER-PLATED SOL had seen too much of wild life to be easily surprised or daunted, and when the bullet whistled past his head, as he

and Lovering sat in the cabin, it merely seemed to have the effect of arousing him to new life.

He had enemies in Bowlder Bar who plainly intended to make the fight one to the death, but he did not propose to give them a clear track any longer. A desire to work out his case *sub rosa* had led to his twice falling into their hands, but half-way measures had been proven foolish and he had returned to the town resolved to look well to himself.

Consequently, the bullet had hardly passed his head before he was on his feet, and with three long strides he reached the door. Tearing it open, he sprung out, a cocked revolver in his hand. One man only was visible, and he was briskly running away.

Sol bounded after him like a bloodhound on the trail, and it required but a few seconds to overtake him.

He caught him by the shoulders and whirled him around, and then, as a revolver was shoved forward, knocked it out of his hand.

"No, yer don't!" he observed. "You might have better luck at this distance than you did before, and I am not to be perforated at your will. Come this way!"

The fellow had tried to make a stout resistance, but he was helpless in Sol's hands, and was dragged back to the cabin with as little ceremony as though he had been a Government mail-bag.

Then the rover sent him sprawling on the floor.

"Here he is!" Sol coolly observed. "Fine specimen of the *genus* assassin, isn't he?"

"About what might be expected," answered Lovering, looking at the rough face before them.

The man rolled over and sullenly arose.

"I'll have your blood for that!" he growled.

"Go away!" said Sol. "You must be joking. Your worst fault is your modesty. Why don't you ask for the earth? If you'll allow me to set up shop as a prophet, I should say what you are the most likely to get is a broken head!"

The prisoner did not answer, but stood looking alternately at Sol and the door. The rover did not heed his evident desire to escape.

"The thing now before the jury is: Who the blazes are you, and why did you try to shoot me?"

"I didn't try," answered the rough. "I was only passin' th' house. I saw a man fire, and then he ran away."

"Oh, rubbish!" Sol commented. "Do you take me for a fool? I can see some distance on a clear day. You tried to kill me, and I am going to have the bottom facts of the case or make you howl. How is it—do you talk or not?"

The question was not answered. A glitter in the man's eyes, which were still turned toward the door, aroused Sol's suspicions, and he turned toward that quarter just as three additional men leaped through the doorway. That they were allies of the first man was clear, and as they came with revolvers in their hands, their errand admitted of but one construction.

Sol's change of attention gave the prisoner a chance, and he bounded upon him like a flash, wrapping his arms around his body, while his voice arose loudly:

"Close in! Kill them both!"

There was a forward movement, but Lovering quickly showed of what material he was made. He had stood passive before, but he had seen his share of wild life in the past, and he was not inclined to cower in the present emergency.

He threw up his revolver and fired twice in quick succession, and one of the assailants clapped his hand to his breast, staggered a few steps and then fell prostrate to the floor.

Another moment and all the party were mixed in a confused, but desperate struggle.

Silver-Plated Sol now showed the strongest side of his character. He was one who preferred to keep out of trouble while he could, but he knew the roughs were there for no other purpose than murder, and he was not inclined to yield all so tamely.

He shook off the man who had seized him, and then plunged headlong into the fight. There were revolvers drawn against him, but he did not touch his own. Instead, he struck out from the shoulder with lusty blows, which sent his foes right and left—where he charged there was a perceptible giving way of opposing material.

In the midst of the fight, however, a cry arose from the other room—a cry in a woman's voice—and it acted on the rover like a spur. He knew Lois was in danger, and he made a dash to clear his enemies.

He would have passed them all had not one fellow, whom he had knocked down, seized his foot and tripped him. He was quickly up, and his hand was on the door; it resisted him—it was fastened.

He flung himself against it with all his force and it flew from its hinges.

One glance in the room was enough to show him that Lois was not there, however.

He retreated to the main room just as Lovering sent two shots after the retreating roughs. Two of their number were left on the floor to tell of Lovering's good aim.

"The girl is gone!" cried the rover.

"Gone?" Lovering echoed.

"Yes; there were others in the assault, and those fellows merely engaged our attention while she was stolen. To the rescue!—follow me!"

He dashed from the cabin, closely followed by the elder man. He expected an ambush, and his own hands were on his revolvers. He was thoroughly aroused at last, and his flashing eyes were like those of an angry and hunted lion.

When the open air was reached no shots met them, however, and they saw the kidnappers retreating toward the west. One brief exchange of words passed between the two men, and then they hastened in pursuit.

Lovering was the cooler of the two, and looking back he saw that a general uproar was going on at the village, while a red glare was shooting up against the sky from more than one burning building.

Bowlder Bar seemed to have lost its head and entered on an era of violence and bloodshed.

"It's a red night!" he muttered, as he kept at Sol's side.

"It will be a red night for those hounds!" the rover declared, hoarsely. "You asked me to-night if I would risk my life for Lois; we'll see now who will do the most."

"God bless you!" said Lovering, fervently. "You are a man of lion heart, and though I thought I was forever off the war-path, I'll be glad to take one more brush at your side."

No more words were spoken, but side by side they strained every nerve to cut down the lead of the kidnappers. Perhaps their efforts would have been useless, but the fugitives were burdened by their prisoner, and as Madrock Ledge was neared they lost ground perceptibly.

Always keeping his gaze on Lois to see that they did not execute any trick, Sol shouted to them to halt. The order was not obeyed, however, and he dared not fire lest he should hit the wrong person.

The ascent of the ledge was a fatal work for the kidnappers, however; they went up but slowly, while Sol cut down the remaining distance with long, agile bounds.

"Surrender!" he shouted.

"Shoot the fool!" ordered a harsh voice, and several revolvers arose together.

They spoke together, but the rover had dropped flat to the ledge, and he arose uninjured.

"If it's war you want, war it is!" he hissed, and he fired twice in quick succession.

There was no longer danger of shooting Lois, and his shots went so true that both men fell. Lovering came in with a lively fusilade, and, unable to stand so much hot work, all the kidnappers turned and fled with a single exception.

One man remained, and he leveled his revolver with one hand while holding Lois with the other.

"Back!" he cried, hoarsely. "Another step and you are dead men!"

But Lois caught his arm and turned it aside.

"Now!" she cried, to Sol.

The rover leaped forward, and in a moment more his strong hands were on the kidnapper. They clinched, and on the bald surface of Madrock a furious struggle began. They were well matched, and they whirled about so rapidly that Lovering could see no chance to aid Sol. He followed, weapon in hand, but, like the combatants, was blind to one fact until Lois's voice arose in frightened tones.

"Merciful Heaven!" she exclaimed, "they will fall into Mad river!"

Her words aroused both men to fresh efforts. They were directly above that point where the river flung its foaming waters against the ragged ledge—a point where a fall meant death—and thus warned they fought with renewed vigor.

Lovering pressed close, seeking in vain to get a chance to aid his friend, but the rover was equal to the demands of the occasion. Putting forth all his powers, he raised his antagonist in a resistless hold and flung him from the rock.

A faint cry arose from the darkness, and then Sol dropped nearly breathless on the rock. Lois knelt by his side, while Lovering looked down on the village where the red glow told that the rioters had done their work thoroughly, if not well.

Silver-Plated Sol's prostration was but temporary; he arose, drew a long breath, and declared he felt once more like himself.

A conference was held, and they consulted as to the best way of returning to the village so as to escape observation. Sol suggested the course past the Eighteen-Carat Mine. True, the rioters were there, but they were not likely to make war on a woman, and they could pass near without being seen.

They went, and were moving cautiously among the rocks to avoid discovery, when Dave Bond appeared on the scene. They paused for a moment as he began his address to the mob, and Sol saw with pleasure that he was likely to control the rough element.

But suddenly a man arose at a point not ten feet from them, and took aim with a revolver at the rover. Sol leaped up, but he was too

late to prevent the shot. The fellow fired and Dave fell.

Another moment and Sol's arms were about him, and despite his struggles he dragged him into the view of the miners.

"Here is the assassin!" he cried. "Bring a rope and Dave Bond's death shall be avenged!"

There was a responsive shout, but the supposed dead man arose, laughing.

"Wait till I'm hurt, men," he said. "I seed ther critter aimin', and thought it best ter drop before ther pistol went off. I'm right side up with care, but ez I don't like to be shot at, perhaps we hed better give this feller a lesson. Throw him in ther river!"

CHAPTER XLI.

THE MAGICIAN UNMASKED.

SILVER-PLATED SOL would have preferred to see the would-be assassin kept for trial, but Giant Dave ruled the crowd during the hour, and at his command the fellow was flung over the rocks. His life was not in danger, but he was liable to carry off a few bruises.

At this point Alvord advanced.

"Men," he said, "I have a word to say to you. Jason Bunker wishes to make a compromise. He says he has had enough of Bowlder Bar, and that if you will let up on your punishment, he will sell the Eighteen-Carat and leave the Bar to-morrow."

A faint cheer arose, but a thoughtful miner inquired:

"Who's ter be ther purchaser?"

"I am."

A ringing cheer arose at one side. It came from the best of the old force of the mine, who had marched there in a body, and who could not restrain their enthusiasm at the prospect of working under Alvord.

If the rioters had been inclined to hesitate, the chance to get in their voices was taken from them. Alvord, as we already know, was a great favorite at the mine, and the old hands made themselves heard and felt, and the matter was soon settled, the mob only making one provision.

They demanded that the transfer of the mine should at once take place.

Neither of the principals in the affair objected. Bunker was anxious to close out all connection with the mine, and he had placed the figure of sale at so low a point that Alvord was equally anxious to close the bargain before he would have time to change his mind.

Thus ended the riot, and the whole party acted as an escort to Bunker and Alvord on the way to Lawyer Acton's office. Once there the bargain was soon consummated, and Alvord became the legal owner of the Eighteen-Carat.

He made a speech, in which he said that all the old men could return to work as before, and he appointed David Bond superintendent, in place of himself, resigned. The promotion pleased the crowd; they cheered lustily; and Dave found himself the hero of the occasion. His fortunes had taken such a sudden turn that he could hardly believe he was awake. Twenty-four hours before he had been out of work and miserable; now he was superintendent of the mine and Ettala was his wife.

How Lois was placed with friends likely to protect her in the future, and other minor points, we need not explain; enough that the night, which had begun so redly, closed in peace and harmony, with little danger of future rioting.

Silver-Plated Sol and Lovering slept quietly in their cabin, but when another day dawned the rover arose with a fixed purpose. He had been using his perceptive faculties, as well as asking what questions he could, and he had gained both facts and theories, and intended to make use of them to the best of his ability.

He surprised Lovering by asking him if he would go to the mountain and leave a note at a certain point.

"Leave a note! For who?" said Lovering, in surprise.

"You may see it and judge," said Sol, smiling.

He then folded a sheet of blank paper into the form of an envelope and handed it to his companion.

"What sort of a joke is this? There isn't a word on it," the elder man said, dubiously.

"True, and there is no need of any, but the signal will be answered quickly. It'll bring certain men to town, and this mixed-up case will soon be settled. The dogs of war are closing in, and the end must come speedily."

"I know more than you suspect," said Lovering, steadily. "Wouldn't it be well to trust me?"

"Don't ask it: I like to play a lone hand."

"At least give me one promise."

"And that?"

"Is that you will not make war on Lois."

"I swear it!"

Sol spoke earnestly, and the two men clasped hands on the compact. Then Lovering took the blank note, went out without a word and started for the mountain.

"It works well," said the rover, coolly. "Now for Hamed."

After carefully examining his revolvers, he took his way toward Madrock Ledge. It looked peaceful enough after the exciting scenes of the previous night, but he kept his eyes well open as he approached the Magician's house. Hamed must be aware who had rescued Lois—Sol was even sure the subsequent attack was due to him—and he would not have any affection for the rover.

Still, there was no stir, and Sol knocked at the door. It was opened by Sing-So, as usual, but the Chinaman looked at his visitor as indifferently as though he had never seen him before.

"I want to see Hamed," Sol observed, coolly.

"Hamed gone away, all samee."

"Where's he gone?"

"Don't knowee; he no tellee Sing-So."

"When did he go?"

"Last nightee."

Sol knew the conversation was a useless one, but he had not been keeping it up without a motive. He had been using his eyes keenly, and the fact that there was a tremor about the inner door betrayed the further fact that there was another listener to the interview. Suddenly Sol crossed the threshold, and, with a long stride, reached Hamed's sanctum and tore the door open.

The Magician had not had time to close it, and he and the rover stood face to face. But Colton, after once beginning war, was not the man to stand on ceremony, and without a word he reached forward and seized Hamed's beard.

A vigorous pull and the silvery mass gave way; the beard was only a false one; and as it was removed, forty years seemed lifted from the Magician's shoulders.

Nor was that all. Thus transformed, Sol easily recognized the man, and, tapping him on the shoulder, he sternly said:

"If you are not too busy with your magic, you may go with me, Master Luke Burbank!"

At about the same hour Lois Orme, alone in the room supplied her by friends since the riot, was informed that Joseph Danforth wished to see her. She was surprised, although Sol Colton had told her such an event was very probable. It was also unpleasant, but, as Sol had asked her to see the man if he did call, she sent word that she would see him.

He came in looking wholly unlike himself. His face was pale and dark rings surrounded his eyes, while there was an expression which seemed only fit for a hunted man visible about his mouth and eyes.

He greeted her moodily, and then spoke abruptly:

"I am going to leave Bowlder Bar!"

"You are," said Lois, with some surprise.

"Yes."

"Isn't this a sudden determination?"

"In one sense of the word, yes, but I am left alone. Ettala is married to a man I hate—I mean Dave Bond—and the town has become too lawless for me. I am going away in search of peace."

"I hope you will find it," answered the girl, somewhat awkwardly.

"Are you sincere enough to help me?"

The question was so sudden as to make her start.

"I? What can I do?"

"It rests with you whether my future life is happy or a desert. Lois, I love you! Go with me as my wife, and I will devote my whole life to making you happy, finding my reward in your responsive love!"

The proposal was made with a strange mixture of defiance and entreaty, and she shrank back from the passion expressed in his face. He looked like a man out of his mind, and as she had never had too high an opinion of him, she did not know what would be the result of a refusal. Yet, she had but one answer to make, and in a confused way she managed to tell him he was very kind, but that she could not entertain the idea.

He was not to be so easily rebuffed, and he made an appeal half-defiant, half-prayerful, which still further revealed the condition of his mind. Plainly, he was far from being his old self, and Lois grew alarmed and wished she had never granted the interview.

Her persistent refusal made him angry at last.

"It is just as well for you to use some caution," he said, threateningly. "I know more about you than you would wish told. Your name is not Lois Orme, but Bertha Wardner, and you are wanted in Illinois as the thief of twenty thousand dollars, the property of Abram Selden. Do not fly too high, or I will betray you to justice!"

"You have no right to say that. Is it just or manly?"

"We are not talking of anything of that kind now; might makes right, and I ask you whether you will marry me or have word sent to those who want you that a thief may be had here?"

"I am no thief!" Lois vehemently declared.

"They can prove you one, and you will go to

prison for an indefinite time—for years. Will you have it so, or will you marry me?"

"I will never marry you!" she declared, with emphasis.

He caught her wrist in a painful grasp.

"Beware!" he said, savagely. "The blood is boiling in my veins, and I will not be answerable for what I may do."

"Release me!" she panted. "Let go of my wrist, or I will call for aid!"

"If you call you seal your doom!" he declared, a wild light in his eyes, and he drew a revolver and brandished it before her face. "My life has grown valueless, and I may as well die here as elsewhere—with you. Swear to be my wife, or the town will ring with a double tragedy."

Her blood seemed to chill. His look was like that of a maniac, and she felt that his will was strong to keep his threat. What would save her? She dared not call for aid, and she seemed forgotten by those who should be her friends.

"Swear!" he repeated hoarsely, cocking the revolver.

The girl fell upon her knees.

"Spare me!" she gasped; "in Heaven's name spare me! I—I will promise—"

Her hesitating speech was cut short as Danforth again seized her by the arm.

"Traitor!" he hissed, "you would betray me to my foes. This shall be your reward—death!"

And he pressed the revolver at her heart.

CHAPTER XLII.

CONCLUSION.

ONE moment Lois's life was in mortal peril, and then the presented revolver was torn from Danforth's grasp and he was himself hurled back. He struggled, but he was in the grasp of Silver-Plated Sol and the rover's arm seemed to be of iron.

"It is finished!" Colton sternly said. "Joseph Danforth, you are a prisoner, and your red career is over. Enter, all!"

He had turned to the door, and several persons entered. Among them were Lovering, Alvord, Sam Leach, and several prominent public men. Two persons came as prisoners, and were Luke Burbank and Sing-So, the Chinaman. Last, but not the least, was a litter on which lay a man so ill that few at first recognized him as Mose Devlin, the pugilist.

"The scene will be necessarily painful," resumed Sol, when all were inside, "and I will make it as brief as possible. First, let me present to you Hamed, the Magician of Madrock Ledge, otherwise Luke Burbank. He has carried on a very successful masquerade, but the truth will out."

The captive gambler caught Lois's wondering gaze and laughed aloud.

"It's a fact, Miss Orme. As Hamed I was only a fraud, but it was your fault, not mine, that you at one time thought I was your father, Bernard Wardner."

"We will attend to that, anon," said Sol, coolly. "The next thing I wish to say is that Joseph Danforth is a prisoner, charged with having killed one Roger Hillard, at Red Summit, this Territory!"

The postmaster had dropped into a chair and his face was ghastly pale, but, except that his wild eyes were fixed on Sol, he gave no sign that he heard.

"Mose Devlin," the rover continued, "your voice comes in here."

"I'm a dyin' man," said the pugilist, hoarsely, "an' I call on all ter witness ther truth o' what I say. Joe Danforth hired me, an' we killed Hillard together. Danforth disguised hisself in woman's clothes, so thar would be less danger o' detection, an' we made ther journey together. I held Hillard so he couldn't git away, an' Danforth stabbed him. That's ther truth!"

"His object was plain," added Colton. "Here, friends, you see Lois Orme, whose real name is Bertha Wardner. She has been accused of stealing twenty thousand dollars, but a man is here who has a word to say on the subject."

He waved his hand, and a stranger stepped forward, removed his hat and addressed Lois, who was pale and troubled.

"I have come all the way from Illinois, Miss Wardner," he said, "as an agent from the Selden heirs. They wish to say to you that they have wronged you. The missing money of Abram Selden has been found; it was buried in the cellar of his house. You are free from all charge, and there is a gift of money from the repentant heirs awaiting you."

"This gentleman arrived in the village just in time," said Silver-Plated Sol, looking at Lois earnestly, "and the whole case will now be speedily settled. It only remains to explain why Danforth killed Hillard. In a town near Red Summit lives one Charles Winter, or Lawson, as he now calls himself. He told Danforth that Miss Orme had twenty thousand dollars of stolen money, and that Hillard was the only man who could betray her to justice. So Danforth resolved to kill Hillard and marry Miss Orme. He risked his soul—and lost. I was first started on the trail by a letter written to Dan-

forth by Winter, which I found in the gulch when the stage was robbed, but clews have been wheeling into line and all is now clear. I believe that is all."

"There is one thing more," said Lovering, stepping forward.

"Is there? Well, you have the floor."

"I have a statement to make which may be of interest to Lois Orme, if to no one else. My name is Bernard Wardner, and I am her father!"

The statement was a surprise to all, and for awhile no one spoke. It was Lovering who first broke the silence.

"Perhaps, after the so-called Hamed had allowed himself to be regarded as Wardner, I, too, may be thought an impostor, but I can prove all I assert. I am the genuine Wardner, and I resume the name now never to discard it again."

Lois did not look particularly pleased, and Sol spoke resentfully.

"You are rather late in claiming your identity."

Wardner laughed.

"Better late than never, but I had a reason for all I have done. I have been all over the known world since I left Illinois, and when I returned I knew not how matters stood, and so hid myself under an assumed name. Bertha, have you no kind word for your father?"

He looked beseechingly at Lois, but her face did not soften at once.

"If you are he, I must ask why you left your home as you did, a score of years ago, and have never sent any word to me until this late day."

"I am to blame, and perhaps I deserve to be forever cast off," he gloomily said. "It is a family affair which need not be detailed here. Enough that I was made to think evil of a wife always too good for me, and that, believing she might attempt my life, I deserted her and went to New Orleans. There I was kidnapped and put on board an ocean vessel. Five days we sailed, and then I was flung overboard one dark night. They thought I perished. I did not, for I was a strong swimmer, and I was picked up by another craft before my strength failed."

"By that time I was tired of life. I told people my name was Lovering. Then began my career as a wanderer. I have served on almost every species of craft that floats the water, as man and as officer; I have trod the jungles of India, the unknown districts of Africa, the lonely paths of Siberia and the summits of the Andes—it is easier to say where I have not been."

"Fate is strange, my friends. Under the shadow of Mount Popocatepetl, where I least expected it, I met the man who had poisoned my mind against my family a score of years before. He died in my arms, after confessing his falsehoods, and there he is buried. After that I returned home. I heard my daughter was a thief. I set out to find her, and I have done it. I am no longer young. I am a man well advanced in years. My days as a wanderer are over, and I have only one thing to look to—my daughter!"

He looked at her in a double sense, and she placed her hand in his.

"Daughterly love is not the growth of an hour," she said, "but I am too well pleased to reject you now. We will wait and know each other better."

"Enough has been said for now," added Silver-Plated Sol, "and this conference may as well break up. Mr. Sheriff, Joseph Danforth is your prisoner."

They advanced to take him as he sat still and silent in his chair, but at the first touch the sheriff recoiled.

"He is dead!" he said.

It was so. The postmaster sat dead in his chair, free forever from human justice. Perhaps he died of heart-disease, but those about him believed he had contrived to take poison.

"As Devlin is about gone, Sing-So and I seem to be about the only subjects for justice," said Burbank, with a reckless laugh. "Better let Sing-So go free. His only crime is too much devotion to a bad master—your humble servant. And what can you do with me? Very little. I defy you to trace any real crime to my door. I have played a bold game in Bowlder Bar, and while pretending to be Danforth's right bower, tried to engineer a case for myself and get the Selden money. That's why I imprisoned Miss Orme, and so forth, but the play is ended. Pull down the curtain and let the world jog on. What's the odds as long as we're happy?"

"You will be less happy when I'm through with you," said Silver-Plated Sol, grimly. "Despite your defiance, I'm going to send you to prison for a term of years!"

At the same time Dave Bond and Ettala, his wife, were together in a room at the post-office building. It had not been thought best to have them at the general meeting, for Joseph's disgrace would soon cast a shadow over their newly-begun married life.

They were happy, but with Giant Dave it was a surprise which the passing moments

could not put to flight. He could not realize that he, the plain, uneducated, rough miner had won such a wife as Ettala.

"You say 'tain't a dream, but reality," he observed, "an' I s'pose you must be right, but it's right odd. Are you sure you hev done wisely?"

"Wisely? How can it be otherwise when you are such a noble man?" asked Ettala, her hand in his.

"I wa'n't always so. I was onc't rough an' lawless, an' thar's a dark drama in my life—"

"Do not mention it. Let us forget what you may have been and remember only what you are. Let nothing cloud our happiness."

"Nothin' o' my doing shall, and with such a star ez you ter guide me, I feel sure I shall never go wrong ag'in'. Luck has come ter me when I deserved it, and I won't go back on't. I'm superintendent o' the Eighteen-Carat, an' fur your sake, ef fur nothin' else, I'll do my work well. Thar's a light in ther East, an' I won't leave it fur darkness."

Days, weeks, months have passed. Luke Burbank is in prison, serving time as Sol had said he should do, and Sing-So's there on a lighter sentence: Hamed is seen no more at Madrock Ledge; Danforth and Devlin are buried near the village; Sam Leach has gone to some place to his old acquaintances unknown, as is also the case with Bunker and Charles Winter.

The Eighteen-Carat Mine is running prosperously. Alvord is owner, and, as superintendent, Dave Bond is successful and very well liked. There is a rumor that Alvord will soon make him a partner. He and Ettala live happily, placidly, and no trouble has of late crossed their life-paths.

In a prosperous place in Colorado is a handsome house. Inquirers are told that it is owned by one Bernard Wardner, and that his daughter and her husband, Sol Colton, live with him; that harmony reigns in the house and that all its inmates are widely respected.

There Silver-Plated Sol has anchored his life-bark, and he has never been sorry that he asked Lois to accept his hand and his fortunes. His adventures and wandering seem over, and he is a happy man.

THE END.

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